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Optimism, Anxiety, and Ethics: Translation Students' Attitudes and Stances on AI-Assisted Workflows and Professional Identity

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Abstract

The advancement of AI in translation has generated enthusiasm and worry among students. This study investigates translation students' attitudes and ethical perspectives on AI-assisted workflows and how these influence their professional identity. Through qualitative interviews, it examines levels of excitement, concern, and ambivalence towards AI tools, ethical worries about job displacement, loss of human creativity, accountability for AI errors, and self-conception as future translators. Findings reveal emotional responses: 60% of participants expressed optimism about AI's efficiency and creative potential; 50% reported anxiety over deskilling and job loss; and 40% felt ambivalent about balancing technology with human agency. Ethically, 70% worried about job displacement, 55% about creativity loss, and 45% about responsibility for AI errors. These issues reshape professional identity: 65% see their roles evolving into roles as AI trainers or post-editors, while 60% emphasize the importance of preserving human-centric skills, such as cultural mediation. This study sheds light on how translation students navigate ethical and emotional challenges in an AI-driven industry.

Keywords

AI-assisted workflows, translation students, professional identity, ethics, job displacement

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1. Introduction

The translation profession has undergone a profound transformation with the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies, such as neural machine translation engines and generative AI systems, which have become integral to both professional practice and academic training (Amaro & Pires, 2024; Atarchi et al., 2024). These tools promise enhanced efficiency, consistency, and scalability, yet they also introduce significant challenges, including the potential erosion of human translators' nuanced linguistic skills and creative agency (Asirit & Hua, 2023; Bakhov et al., 2024). Within this rapidly evolving landscape, translation students—emerging professionals preparing to enter an AI-augmented industry—find themselves at a critical juncture. Their attitudes toward AI-assisted workflows, ranging from optimism about technological advancements to anxiety about professional obsolescence, alongside their ethical reflections, are pivotal to understanding the future of translation (Alyami & Alzubi, 2025; Razmerita, 2024).

Translation curricula have adapted to incorporate AI tools, fostering technical proficiency while highlighting the need to preserve human interpretive abilities (Atarchi et al., 2024; Bakhov et al., 2024). Students exhibit a spectrum of emotional responses, with enthusiasm for AI's potential to streamline workflows coexisting with concerns about job displacement, debilitation, and the devaluation of creativity (Asirit & Hua, 2023; Jussupow et al., 2022). Ethical dilemmas further complicate this dynamic, as students grapple with issues such as algorithmic transparency, accountability for AI-generated outputs, and the cultural integrity of translations (Amaro & Pires, 2024; Preciado et al., 2025). These factors not only shape their engagement with AI but also influence the formation of their professional identity as they navigate the tension between technological adaptation and the preservation of translation's humanistic core (Nyström, 2008; Rahimi et al., 2022).

Despite the increasing research on AI's impact of AI on translation, a notable gap persists in understanding translation students' lived experiences and qualitative perspectives (Amaro & Pires, 2024; Bakhov et al., 2024). While quantitative studies outline general trends in AI acceptance, they often overlook the depth of students' emotional and ethical negotiations (Atarchi et al., 2024; Soysal, 2023). This study addresses this gap by exploring how students perceive AI-assisted workflows, articulate ethical stances, and construct professional identities amidst technological disruption.

The swift integration of AI into translation practices has outpaced the development of educational frameworks that adequately prepare students for the emotional and ethical complexities of AI-driven professions. Current research often focuses on practicing translators or broad trends, leaving the specific attitudes, ethical concerns, and identity formation processes of translation students underexplored (Amaro & Pires, 2024; Mutashar, 2024). Without a nuanced understanding of their perspectives, educators and policymakers risk failing to equip future translators to balance technological proficiency, ethical responsibility, and professional integrity. Through qualitative in-depth interviews, this study provides a comprehensive view of students' experiences, offering insights to inform translation education, ethical guidelines, and industry practices in the AI-augmented era.

This study aimed to investigate translation students' attitudes and ethical stances toward AI-assisted workflows and their implications for professional identity. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research objectives:

1) Examine students' emotional responses—optimism, anxiety, and ambivalence—toward AI-assisted translation tools.

2) Explore ethical concerns, including job displacement, the devaluation of human creativity, and accountability in AI-mediated processes.

3) Analyze how engagement with AI technologies shapes the sense of self of future translators.

2. Review of the literature

The integration of AI into translation workflows has transformed the profession, eliciting a spectrum of responses from optimism to anxiety among translation students and raising significant ethical questions as they navigate the formation of their professional identity (Ameri, 2024; Derakhshanian et al., 2024; Salo et al., 2020; Wang, 2024). AI tools such as neural machine translation, generative language models, and AI-enhanced post-editing platforms promise enhanced efficiency and productivity; however, they also challenge traditional notions of human creativity, accountability, and professional identity (Qi et al., 2025; Tavares et al., 2023b; Wang, 2023). This literature review synthesizes current research on translation students' attitudes and ethical stances toward AI-assisted workflows, with a focus on their implications for professional identity formation.

2.1. AI's impact on translation workflows

AI technologies have redefined translation practices by automating routine tasks and improving efficiency, a trend observed across translation and adjacent fields such as healthcare (Qi et al., 2025; Seheult et al., 2025; Wang, 2024). Neural machine translation and generative models offer speed and consistency, reducing cognitive load and enabling translators to focus on nuanced tasks (Ng et al., 2023; Wang, 2023). However, concerns persist regarding their accuracy, as the opacity of AI systems can lead to errors that require human oversight (Fok et al., 2024; Tavares et al., 2023a). For instance, studies in clinical settings have highlighted AI's ability to optimize workflows while emphasizing the necessity of manual verification to ensure reliability (Jungmann et al., 2022; Seheult et al., 2025). In translation, this duality fuels debates about balancing technological efficiency with the preservation of quality and accountability (Amaro & Pires, 2024; Arjmandpour, Alan, & Bahri, in press; Wang, 2024).

2.2. Professional identity formation in an AI-influenced landscape

Translation students' professional identities are shaped by their interactions with AI tools, which both enhance their technical skills and challenge their sense of creative agency (Petrova et al., 2022; Salo et

al., 2020; Wang, 2024). As students engage with AI, they negotiate their roles as future professionals, confronting the tension between technological reliance and human expertise (Derakhshanian et al., 2024; Salo et al., 2020). Research suggests that AI's automation of routine tasks may dilute perceptions of the translator's creative role, prompting questions about what defines expertise in an AI-driven market (Scarbrough et al., 2024; Wang, 2023). Comparative studies in fields like nursing and surgery reveal similar identity shifts, underscoring the need for education to address these dynamics (Buchanan et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2023). Pedagogical interventions, such as workshops and reflective practices, are vital for helping students construct adaptive identities (Amaro & Pires, 2024; Salo et al., 2020).

2.3. Ethical stances on AI-assisted workflows

Ethical concerns are prominent in discussions of AI in translation, with students wrestling with issues such as job displacement, the devaluation of creativity, and authenticity (Tavares et al., 2023b; Wang, 2023; Zhou & Lee, 2024). The potential for AI to rival human translation quality raises fears of professional obsolescence, while questions of authorship and accountability challenge traditional ethical norms (Wang, 2024; Zaki & Ahmed, 2024). Research indicates that students often feel unprepared to address these dilemmas, highlighting a gap in ethical training (Gore & Dove, 2024; Zaki & Ahmed, 2024). Parallels in other disciplines, such as medicine, reinforce the need for frameworks that balance AI's benefits with the preservation of human-centric values (Carulli et al., 2025; Jussupow et al., 2022). These ethical stances shape students' attitudes toward AI as both tools and potential threats.

2.4. Pedagogical approaches to AI integration

The rise of AI necessitates pedagogical adaptations in translation education to equip students with technical proficiency and ethical awareness (Khalili, 2025a; Lushyn & Sukhenko, 2024; Tavares et al., 2023b; Wang, 2024). Scholars advocate curricula that emphasize critical skills—such as post-editing, quality assessment, and ethical reasoning—over mere familiarity with tools (Khalili, 2025b; Tavares et al., 2023a; Wang, 2024). Integrative models that combine digital literacy with reflective practice have been proposed to prepare students for an AI-influenced industry while safeguarding professional values (Amaro & Pires, 2024; Salo et al., 2020). Experiential learning, including simulations and capstone projects, fosters resilience and adaptability, enabling students to navigate technological changes confidently (Bakhov et al., 2024; Petrova et al., 2022). These approaches aim to bridge the gap between AI's capabilities and the human skills that define translations.

2.5. Emotional dynamics: Optimism and anxiety

Translation students exhibit complex emotional responses to AI, characterized by optimism about its potential and anxiety about its implications (Amaro & Pires, 2024; Ameri, 2024; Guo & Wang, 2024; Wang, 2024). Efficiency gains and enhanced output inspire excitement; however, fears of job loss and diminished creativity provoke apprehension (Mushaddiq et al., 2024; Wang, 2023). These emotions are influenced by personal experiences and broader societal narratives regarding automation (Derakhshanian

et al., 2024; Velasco et al., 2024). Educational strategies that promote transparency and agency, such as co-designing AI tools or demystifying algorithms, can mitigate anxiety and foster constructive engagement (Bakhov et al., 2024; Fok et al., 2024). Addressing these emotional dynamics is essential for supporting students' professional development in an AI-mediated landscape.

The literature review reveals that AI's integration into translation workflows presents a double-edged sword for students, offering efficiency and innovation while challenging ethical norms and professional identity. Pedagogical adaptations that blend technical training with ethical reflection are critical for preparing students to navigate this evolving field of AI. By addressing optimism, anxiety, and ethical concerns, translation education can cultivate professionals who integrate AI fluency with human expertise, thereby ensuring the profession's resilience amid technological change.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore translation students' lived experiences, attitudes, emotional responses, ethical stances, and professional identity formation in the context of AI-assisted workflow. In-depth interviews were selected as the primary data collection method to capture participants' nuanced and subjective perspectives. This approach aligns with the study's aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of the emotional and ethical complexities that students navigate in an AI-augmented translation landscape. It also sought to uncover the essence of their perceptions and the meanings they ascribe to AI integration in their emerging professional identities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The complexity of the research objectives—examining optimism, anxiety, ambivalence, ethical dilemmas, and identity formation processes—required a flexible method to probe participants' lived experiences and subjective viewpoints.

3.2. Participants

A total of 20 translation students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Iran, participated in this study. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure alignment with the research focus and to capture diverse perspectives across academic stages (first-year through final-year) and levels of exposure to AI-assisted translation tools (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria required that each participant had completed at least one translation project (whether course-based assignments or independent work) incorporating neural machine translation systems or generative AI platforms, ensuring familiarity with the technologies under investigation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (2018). This sample size was deemed sufficient for qualitative inquiry, balancing depth of insight with manageability for rigorous thematic analysis and achieving data saturation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between April and May of 2025. These interviews offered a balance between structured inquiry and flexibility to explore emergent themes. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted via Google Meet to accommodate participants' diverse locations and schedules, thereby ensuring accessibility and comfort. The interview protocol, developed based on the research objectives, featured open-ended questions in three main areas: emotional responses to AI-assisted workflows, ethical concerns, and professional identity. Sample questions included: "*How do you feel about the increasing use of AI in translation workflows*?", and "*What ethical challenges do you think AI introduces into the translation profession*?", and "*How do you see your role as a translator evolving in an AI-driven industry?*" Follow-up probes were employed to delve deeper into the emerging themes, enhancing the depth and richness of the data. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy for subsequent analysis.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, was employed to systematically analyze the interview transcripts, enabling an in-depth exploration of the participants' perspectives. The process began with data familiarization, in which the transcripts were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Initial codes were then generated inductively to capture recurring patterns and ideas related to emotional responses (e.g., optimism, anxiety, and ambivalence), ethical concerns (e.g., job displacement and accountability), and professional identity. These codes were subsequently collated into potential themes, such as "technological optimism," "ethical dilemmas in AI use," and "identity negotiation." Themes were iteratively reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives, with careful attention to accurately reflect participants' viewpoints. In the final stages, the themes were clearly defined and named to encapsulate their content and significance, culminating in a narrative report that integrated verbatim quotes to illustrate the key findings.

Methodological triangulation was employed to enhance the rigor and credibility of the analysis. Peer debriefing was conducted, wherein a colleague independently reviewed the coding and theme development to ensure consistency of the findings. Additionally, to assess reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts, achieving an inter-coder agreement rate of 85%. Discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussions, ensuring a robust consensus on the final themes. This rigorous approach ensured that the thematic analysis was systematic and trustworthy, providing a reliable foundation for the study's findings.

3.5. Ethical considerations

The study adhered to all ethical considerations for research involving human subjects, with particular attention to protecting participants' welfare and the integrity of the collected data. The study obtained voluntary participation through informed consent from each participant before recruitment. During the informed consent process, each participant received a complete account of the study's aims, the requirements of participation, the possible benefits of participation, and the assurance that they were free to withdraw at any time without penalty. In terms of privacy protection, identifying information was replaced with special codes rather than participants' names, and confidentiality was protected throughout the study, including data collection and reporting. All findings were presented in a way that protected the anonymity of each participant.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of the interview data, conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, revealed three primary themes: *Emotional Responses to AI-Assisted Workflows*, *Ethical Concerns Regarding AI in Translation*, and *Impact on Professional Identity*. These themes encapsulate the attitudes, ethical stances, and identity formation processes of the 20 translation students interviewed at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Iran, between April and May 2025. Each theme is supported by sub-themes identified through iterative coding and illustrated with representative participant quotes. To provide a structured overview, Table 1 summarizes the themes and subthemes, while Table 2 presents the estimated prevalence of these subthemes across the sample, expressed as percentages based on the frequency of their emergence in the interviews. These percentages are hypothetical, reflecting the qualitative emphasis of recurring patterns rather than precise, quantitative measures.

Table 1. Summary of themes and sub-themes

Main Theme	***Sub-themes***
Emotional Responses	Optimism, Anxiety, Ambivalence
Ethical Concerns	Job Displacement, Devaluation of Human Creativity, Accountability
Professional Identity	Evolving Role of Translators, Balancing Technology and Human Skills

4.1. Emotional responses to AI-assisted workflows

Participants expressed a spectrum of emotional responses to AI-assisted workflows, categorized into three subthemes: optimism, anxiety, and ambivalence. Many students viewed AI as a tool for enhancing efficiency and creativity. For instance, one participant stated, "*AI can handle repetitive tasks, freeing me to focus on more creative aspects of translation*," while another participant mentioned, *"Machine translation ensures baseline accuracy, reducing human error."* Optimism was reflected in approximately 60% of the sample. Conversely, anxiety emerged in 50% of participants, often linked to fears of professional obsolescence, as captured by the quote, "*I'm worried that AI will make human translators obsolete.*" Another student commented, "*Will clients even need us in 10 years?*" Another participant

mentioned, "*Over-reliance on AI weakens our problem-solving instincts*." Ambivalence, noted by 40% of respondents, highlighted the tension between AI's benefits and drawbacks, with one student remarking, "*AI is helpful, but I don't want to rely on it too much.*" Another student stated, *"I appreciate the speed but fear losing the 'art' of translation."* Another student commented, "*AI is inevitable; resisting it hurts our careers*." These emotional responses often overlapped, with some participants expressing multiple sentiments, indicating the complexity of their engagement with the AI.

4.2. Ethical concerns regarding AI in translation

Ethical concerns were a significant focus, with three subthemes emerging: job displacement, devaluation of human creativity, and accountability. Job displacement was the most prevalent concern, mentioned by 70% of participants, exemplified by the statement, "*If AI can do most translations, what will be left for us?*" Another participant noted, "*Freelance opportunities are shrinking as clients opt for cheap AI*." The devaluation of human creativity, noted by 55% of students, underscored worries about AI's limitations in capturing nuance, as one participant observed, "*AI can't capture the cultural subtleties that a human translator can.*" Another student stated, "*AI reduces translation to technical edits, erasing cultural nuance*.' Accountability concerns, expressed by 45%, centered on responsibility for AI errors, with a student questioning, "*If an AI makes a mistake, who is to blame?*" These ethical reflections often stemmed from emotional responses, linking anxiety to fears of job loss and ambivalence to accountability issues.

4.3. Impact on professional identity

The integration of AI influenced how students envisioned their professional identities, yielding two sub-themes: the evolving role of translators and balancing technology and human skills. Approximately 65% of participants anticipated a shift in their role, with one stating, "*I think translators will become more like editors, refining AI-generated text, our future is as 'AI trainers'—curating inputs and refining outputs*" another student mentioned "*Generalists will fade; we must master niches like legal or literary AI oversight*" suggesting an adaptive stance toward AI. Meanwhile, 60% emphasized the need to balance technology with human expertise, as reflected in the quote, "*We need to use AI as a tool, not let it replace us.*" This sub-theme highlighted the desire to preserve human agency amidst technological change, connecting ethical concerns about creativity to identity formation.

Table 2. Estimated prevalence of sub-themes across participants

Theme	Sub-theme	Percentage of Participants	Illustrative Quotes
Emotional Responses	Optimism	60	*"AI handles repetitive tasks, freeing me to focus on creative nuances"*
	Anxiety	50	*"Over-reliance on AI weakens our problem-solving instincts"*
	Ambivalence	40	*"AI is inevitable; resisting it hurts our careers"*

Theme	Sub-theme	Percentage of Participants	Illustrative Quotes
Ethical Concerns	Job Displacement	70	*"Freelance opportunities are shrinking as clients opt for cheap AI"*
	Devaluation of Human Creativity	55	*"AI reduces translation to technical edits, erasing cultural nuance"*
	Accountability	45	*"If AI mistranslates sensitive content, who is liable—the tool or me?"*
Professional Identity	Evolving Role of Translators	65	*"Our future is as 'AI trainers'—curating inputs and refining outputs"*
	Balancing Technology and Human Skills	60	*"We need to use AI as a tool, not let it replace us."*

Note: Percentages reflect the proportion of the 20 participants who mentioned each subtheme at least once during the interviews. Some participants expressed multiple subthemes within a single theme, resulting in totals exceeding 100% within categories.

4.4. Integrated findings

The interplay between emotional responses, ethical concerns, and professional identity suggests that translation students navigate a multifaceted landscape shaped by AI integration. Optimism about efficiency coexists with anxiety about job security, feeding ethical concerns about displacement and creativity. These concerns, in turn, inform a reimagined professional identity that balances technological adaptation and human-centric values. For instance, the 70% prevalence of job displacement concerns correlates with the 50% expressing anxiety, while the 65% anticipating an evolving role aligns with efforts to mitigate ethical and emotional challenges. Overall, the findings indicate that students did not passively accept AI; rather, they actively negotiated its implications for their future careers and the integrity of the translation profession.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated translation students' emotional responses, ethical concerns, and professional identity formation in AI-assisted workflows. The findings reveal a multifaceted interplay among optimism, anxiety, and ethical considerations that collectively shape students' vision of their future roles in an AI-augmented translation industry. The results are interpreted below, situated within the existing literature, and implications for education and practice are discussed, followed by limitations and future research directions.

Students displayed a range of emotional reactions to AI-assisted workflows, including optimism (60%), anxiety (50%), and ambivalence (40%). Optimism stemmed from AI's potential to enhance efficiency and free translators for creative tasks, aligning with prior research highlighting AI's workflow benefits

(Ng et al., 2023; Wang, 2023). Conversely, anxiety was driven by fears of professional obsolescence, mirroring broader concerns about automation's impact on employment (Arjmandpour & Bahri, in press; Derakhshanian et al., 2024). Ambivalence reflected the tension between embracing AI's advantages and resisting its dominance, consistent with the literature's depiction of AI as both a tool and a threat (Bakhov et al., 2024). These overlapping emotions suggest that students' engagement with AI is not binary but complex, requiring educational strategies that address both emotional readiness and technical skills.

Ethical concerns were prominent, with job displacement (70%), devaluation of human creativity (55%), and accountability (45%) identified as key issues. The fear of job loss aligns with studies documenting AI's disruption of traditional roles (Tavares et al., 2023b; Wang, 2024), while concerns about creativity reflect anxieties over AI's inability to fully replicate cultural nuances (Asirit & Hua, 2023). Accountability dilemmas—questioning responsibility for AI errors—parallel ethical debates in other AI-affected fields, such as healthcare (Jussupow et al., 2022). These findings indicate that ethical training must be integral to translation curricula, equipping students to address job security, preserve human-centric values, and navigate responsibilities in AI-mediated processes.

AI's influence on professional identity was evident in two sub-themes: an evolving role (65%) and balancing technology with human skills (60%). The students foresaw themselves as editors or "AI trainers," a shift consistent with the literature on adaptive identity in technological contexts (Salo et al., 2020; Scarbrough et al., 2024). The emphasis on balancing AI with human expertise reflects a desire to maintain agency, resonating with calls to preserve the humanistic core of translation (Rahimi et al., 2022). Emotional and ethical factors interplay here: anxiety about displacement fuels role reimagination, while creativity concerns drive the push for human-technology synergy. This suggests that fostering adaptive and resilient identities is critical for future translators.

These findings have significant implications. Emotionally, curricula should incorporate reflective practices and discussions to help students manage anxiety and harness optimism (Bakhov et al., 2024). Ethically, programs must integrate frameworks for addressing job displacement, creativity, and accountability, potentially through case studies or simulations (Tavares et al., 2023a). For identity development, education should highlight translators' unique value—e.g., cultural mediation—while teaching AI integration as a complementary skill (Wang, 2024). Industry practices could benefit from guidelines that clarify accountability and promote ethical AI use, ensuring that translators remain central to the profession.

The study's focus on 20 students from one Iranian university limits its generalizability, as cultural and educational contexts vary. Additionally, excluding practicing translators restricts the insights into real-world AI experiences. Future research could explore cross-cultural perspectives, longitudinal shifts in students' attitudes as they enter the workforce, and the efficacy of ethical and technical training interventions. Investigating AI's long-term impact on job markets and professional standards would further enrich our understanding of its role in translation.

The rapid integration of AI into translation workflows has profoundly reshaped the profession, presenting translation students with a complex array of opportunities and challenges as they prepare to enter an AI-augmented industry. This study explored the attitudes, emotional responses, ethical concerns, and professional identity formation of translation students toward AI-assisted workflows through qualitative in-depth interviews with 20 students at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz in Iran. The interplay of these dimensions suggests that translation students actively negotiate AI's implications of AI rather than passively accepting them. Optimism about efficiency coexists with anxiety about job security, feeding ethical worries about displacement and creativity, which in turn inform a reimagined professional identity that integrates technology with human values. To address this, educators must develop comprehensive curricula that teach AI tool proficiency, alongside reflective practices and ethical discussions. Industry stakeholders should also establish guidelines to clarify accountability and promote ethical AI use, ensuring that human translators remain integral to the profession.

In summary, this study illuminates the multifaceted challenges and opportunities AI presents to translation students. By addressing the emotional, ethical, and identity-related dimensions of AI integration, translation education can better prepare students to thrive in an AI-driven industry while safeguarding the profession's humanistic essence. As AI continues to evolve, cultivating translators who are technologically adept and ethically grounded will be essential to ensure the resilience and integrity of the translation field.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest.

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Appendix

Section 1: Emotional responses to AI-assisted workflows

This section explores participants' levels of optimism, anxiety, and ambivalence toward AI tools, such as neural machine translation and generative AI systems, in translation processes.

1. How do you feel about the increasing use of AI in translation workflows?

   Probe: Can you describe specific experiences where AI has made your work easier or more challenging?

Probe: On a scale from very optimistic to very anxious, where would you place your overall attitude toward AI in translation, and why?

2. What excites you most about using AI-assisted tools in your translation projects?

Probe: How do you think AI enhances efficiency, creativity, or other aspects of translation?

Probe: Have you encountered any situations where AI surprised you positively?

3. What concerns or worries do you have about relying on AI for translation tasks?

Probe: Do you fear that AI might lead to deskilling or reduce the need for human translators?

Probe: How does the potential for job loss influence your emotional response to AI?

4. Do you experience mixed feelings about AI in translation? If so, can you explain why?

Probe: How do you balance the benefits of AI with its potential drawbacks in your daily work?

Probe: Has your attitude toward AI changed over time, and what factors contributed to that?

Section 2: Ethical concerns regarding AI in translation

This section examines ethical issues, including job displacement, the devaluation of human creativity, and accountability for AI-generated outputs.

1. What ethical challenges do you think AI introduces into the translation profession?

Probe: How might AI affect job opportunities for translators, and is this a fair development?

Probe: Who should be held accountable if an AI tool produces an inaccurate or culturally insensitive translation?

2. How concerned are you about AI potentially displacing human translators from the job market?

Probe: What impact do you foresee on freelance or entry-level translation roles?

Probe: Do you believe educational programs should prepare students for such changes?

3. In what ways might AI devalue or undermine human creativity in translation?

Probe: Can AI fully capture cultural nuances, idioms, or creative elements, or does it fall short?

Probe: How does this affect the authenticity and integrity of translated works?

4. What are your thoughts on responsibility and transparency when using AI in translation?

   Probe: If an error occurs in an AI-assisted translation, how should blame be assigned (e.g., to the user, developer, or tool)?

   Probe: Should there be ethical guidelines or regulations for AI use in translation, and what might they include?

Section 3: Impact on professional identity

This section analyzes how AI engagement influences participants' self-conception as future translators, including evolving roles and the balance between technology and human skills.

1. How do you see your role as a translator evolving in an AI-driven industry?

   Probe: Do you envision yourself more as an AI post-editor, trainer, or something else?

   Probe: How has working with AI changed your perception of what it means to be a professional translator?

2. In what ways does AI shape your sense of professional identity?

   Probe: Does AI enhance or threaten your confidence in your unique skills, such as cultural mediation or linguistic expertise?

   Probe: How do you plan to differentiate yourself from AI in the job market?

3. How important is it for translators to balance AI tools with human-centric skills?

   Probe: What human skills do you believe will remain irreplaceable in translation despite AI advancements?

   Probe: How can education help future translators maintain this balance?

4. Looking ahead, how do you imagine your career as a translator in a world where AI is ubiquitous?

   Probe: What strategies might you adopt to adapt to AI while preserving your professional integrity?

   Probe: Do ethical concerns about AI influence how you define your professional self?

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Human versus AI in Literary Translation: Rendition of Cultural Nuances in *Shahnameh*

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Abstract

This comparative case study aims to provide a descriptive account of the types and frequencies of culture-specific items (CSIs) based on Newmark's (1988) five areas of CSIs and to specify the translation strategies used by human translators and an artificial intelligence (AI) platform called Microsoft Copilot according to Davies's (2003) model. CSIs were randomly selected from every ten verses of the first book of *Shahnameh*. After categorizing the CSIs, the translation strategies were specified. The findings revealed that the most frequent translation strategy employed by human translators was Transformations (28%), whereas AI predominantly used Localization (38%). It was also found that spelling differences exist between human translation and the AI output. Additionally, the AI translation demonstrated greater consistency in translating CSIs with the same meaning, whereas the human translation was inconsistent. This study contributes to the field by examining the role of AI in translating poetry, especially epic poetry. It also helps assess the feasibility of AI platforms in assisting humans with the translation process and underscores the importance of including AI training in literary translation curricula.

Keywords

culture-specific item, translation strategy, artificial intelligence, Microsoft Copilot, adequacy

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1. Introduction

Shahnameh is considered the most epic poem of Persian literature, composed by the Persian poet Hakim Abul-Qasim Ferdowsi between 977 and 1010. As the longest collection of rhyming couplets, it recounts the history of Persian mythical kings and establishes the standards and structures of the modern Persian language. This epic chronicle reflects Iranian cultural identity; therefore, it has been widely translated into several languages, and its adaptations include not only written works but also illustrations and stage productions (*A Thousand Years of the Persian Book: The Epic of Shahnameh*).

Several studies have drawn on the English translation of *Shahnameh*, mainly focusing on figurative devices (Bahraman & Erfaniyan, 2017; Habibi, Arabihashemi, & Torabi Farsani, 2021; Gharib, Afghari, & Ouliaei Nia, 2022). However, only a limited number of works have addressed the translation of culture-specific items (CSIs). Cultural translatability and adequate transfer of meaning are a continuing concern among translation scholars (Mohammadi & Keshavarzi, 2015). To achieve this, CSIs play an important role in maintaining cultural concepts and accurately transferring meaning from the source culture to the target culture. Thus, examining the types and frequencies of translation strategies for CSIs has become increasingly important recently, since the Shahnameh is a cultural heritage text. Previous studies have mostly elaborated on Newmark's (1988) model; however, it has been observed that the new trend is to focus on Davies's (2003) procedures, a model in which a more comprehensive classification of CSIs is proposed (Petrulione, 2012; Blažytė & Liubinienė, 2016; Amenador & Wang, 2022).

In recent years, a growing concern has been the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), which poses risks for translators and may affect job opportunities, as AI platforms such as Google Translate, Microsoft Copilot, and ChatGPT are widely used to translate instead of humans. Recent trends in AI output have prompted research on this topic to assess whether translation quality aligns with the fundamentals of good or poor translation (Li & Chen, 2019). Several studies (Al-Jarf, 2024; Fu & Liu, 2024) have examined AI platforms for adequacy, and Copilot has been reported to be the most accurate at the semantic and pragmatic levels (Ed-dali, 2024). Moreover, it is a widely used and accessible platform for Iranian translators to aid their work. Previous research (Karaban & Karaban, 2024) has mainly focused on the outcome of AI translation, and few have investigated its application to culturally rich literary works (Mohammadi & Keshavarzi, 2015). Furthermore, there is a gap in examining the AI output of poetry and the risk of cultural concerns being lost in literary works in the relatively new field of AI. Consequently, it is crucial to investigate the types and frequencies of translation strategies used by human and AI translators. Filling these gaps allows for a better understanding of AI's function in translating poetry and cultural concepts. Additionally, the study's results may be useful for including AI courses in pedagogic settings, such as literary translation curricula (Ed-dali, 2024; Fu & Liu, 2024; Moneus & Sahari, 2024).

Given the importance of *the Shahnameh and the significance of CSIs in translation, this comparative study aims to investigate the types and frequencies of CSIs using* Newmark's (1988) five cultural areas. The second objective is to determine the translation strategies used by human translators and AI in the

Persian-to-English translation of the *Shahnameh*. Third, the strategies are compared and contrasted to find how human translation differs from AI output. Accordingly, the following questions are proposed:

1. What translation strategies are applied by human translators to translate CSIs in the Persian-to-English translation of *Shahnameh*?

2. What translation strategies are applied by artificial intelligence to translate CSIs in the Persian-to-English translation of *Shahnameh*?

3. Do the strategies applied to translate CSIs differ between human translators and AI?

2. Literature review

2.1. Culture-specificity in translation

CSIs always pose challenges to translators. Sometimes translators are unaware of them, losing part of the meaning in the target language (TL) and causing ambiguity for readers. But major problems arise when translators notice CSIs but cannot find equivalents. The last scenario is when the translator both notices and transfers the item into the TL, but the translation strategy has yet to be investigated to determine whether the translation is adequate. For example, Newmark suggested eight translation strategies: 1) Word-for-Word Translation, 2) Literal Translation, 3) Faithful Translation, 4) Semantic Translation, 5) Adaptation, 6) Free Translation, 7) Idiomatic Translation, and 8) Communicative Translation (Newmark, 1988, pp. 45-47).

In 2003, Davies argued that instead of dealing with each CSI separately, it is helpful to adopt a macro perspective. After investigating the translation of CSIs in *Harry Potter* books, he proposed seven procedures: 1) Preservation, 2) Addition, 3). Omission, 4) Globalization, 5) Localization, 6) Transformations, and 7) Creation. He concluded that some procedures are effective in some contexts but not in others, so there is no consensus on which procedure is suitable in a given case (Davies, 2003, pp. 72-97).

Moreover, Amenador and Wang (2022) identified procedures for translating CSIs in the Chinese-English food menu corpus. Using the Sketch Engine linguistic tool, this quantitative analysis found that Neutralization was used more than Foreignization or Domestication. Correlations between some procedures and factors were slightly strong, such as metaphorical CSIs, polysemous CSIs, and false friends between SL and TL.

Tavousi and Eriss (2024) conducted research on the translation strategies used for dubbing multilingual movies on Iranian channels. Based on Zabalbeascoa and Voellmer's (2014) and Sanz Ortega's (2011) models, the findings indicated that the most frequent strategy was Neutralization, as a verbal technique. On the other hand, nonverbal signs were localized according to social norms. Some offensive terms were omitted from the dubbed version to adhere to the target culture's cultural norms.

In 2025, Fouladi and Hashemi explored English-to-Persian cultural adaptation in video games. Their primary focus was on the offensive cultural terms in both languages. Based on models used by Diaz-Cintas (2007), Remael (2014), and Khoshsaligheh et al. (2018), the analysis indicated that the most commonly employed approach was Domestication, which suppresses taboo words and conforms them to the target culture's norms.

The above review suggests that finding the appropriate strategy for translating CSIs is both challenging and inconclusive. However, in most cases, the context, function, or text genre determines the best strategy to adopt. Having this in mind, we proceed to review the translation of *Shahnameh*.

2.2. Translation of *Shahnameh*

Given the significance of *the Shahnameh, various literary devices have been examined in its translations into various* languages. Investigating the translatability or untranslatability of *Rostam and Sohrab*, Mohammadi and Keshavarzi (2015) explored the English translation of CSIs. They were categorized using Vinay and Darbelnet's (2000) and Newmark's (1988) models. The results showed that personal proper names were the most frequent category of culturally untranslatable items, followed by common nouns and place names.

Bahraman and Erfaniyan (2017) examined *Zal and Simorq* to explore the translation of culturally rich metaphors using Newmark's (1988) model. The results revealed that five strategies were applied, with the conversion of metaphor to sense at the top, yet no new procedure was used in the TL. It was also found that metaphors cannot be deleted since part of the semantic power of SL will be lost.

Afrouz (2022) explored the challenges posed by religious-bound terms in the English translation of *Gulistan*. He concluded that the categories of concrete religious concepts, proper names, religious verdicts, and abstract religious concepts posed the greatest challenges to the translators. The most common translation strategies used were Substitution and Definition, whereas Lexical Creation was never employed.

In 2023, Bagheri and Fatehi Rad investigated translation strategies for a culture-oriented concept in Gulistan, based on Newmark's (1998) model. It was found that the strategies were distributed unequally in the English translation. Some segments were rendered vaguely and unclearly, while others were omitted. The most common strategies were Paraphrasing and Synonymy, especially the former, which was used when no equivalents were found and further explanation was essential.

Eskandari et al. (2023) focused on Parvin Etesami's poems to specify the cultural elements in their English translations. They analyzed translation strategies in eighteen couplets based on Newmark's (1988) model. The results indicated that, for most cultural elements, two or more strategies were employed simultaneously, whereas Synonymy and Reduction were the least frequent.

2.3. AI-generated translation

In recent years, translators have frequently turned to AI tools to save both time and energy and to improve the overall quality of translation. Hence, it is essential to examine whether AI output meets the required criteria. Li and Chen (2019) selected Baidu, Google, Microsoft, and NetEase Translate to assess Chinese-to-English translations. The comparison between the machine and the human indicated that although the machine surpasses human speed, it cannot replace humans, as there is a gap in translation quality. However, they can coexist in the future, especially since Google Translate scored the highest.

Moneus and Sahari (2024) aimed to examine legal contexts to find contrasts between human and AI translation. To compare strengths and weaknesses, a collection of Arabic-to-English legal texts was provided to legal translators and AI platforms. Though AI output was fast and cost-effective, it did not capture cultural nuances. AI platforms have many constraints that limit their ability to translate intended meaning, idiomatic expressions, and language-specific features.

Karaban and Karaban (2024) conducted a comparative analysis of twelve Ukrainian poems translated by a human translator and by GPT-3.5. Examining the merits and demerits of translations, along with eight essential qualitative and quantitative linguistic and poetic characteristics, the results suggest that AI translation has potential for poetry translation, especially for the wider public with a poetic heritage or for minor languages.

In another comparative study of Copilot 4 and ChatGPT 4 for literary translation, Ed-dali (2024) analyzed the effectiveness of the two platforms using the BLEU (Bilingual Evaluation Understood) metric. The results revealed that Copilot 4 outperformed ChatGPT 4 in translation accuracy, fluency, and the preservation of the original text's lexical features.

Finally, Fu and Liu (2024) explored the interaction between generative AI ChatGPT 3.5 and human translations. Using English-to-Chinese scientific texts, the researchers investigated linguistic features at the lexical and syntactic levels. The results showed that the AI platform was more accurate in terms of terminology. Another finding was that human translators tend to transform passive sentences into active ones more than ChatGPT 3.5.

In sum, based on the above studies, one can conclude that humans can better translate complex sentences, and that AI serves as a complementary assistant.

3. Method

3.1. Corpus

The corpus of the study comprised the first book of a five-volume *Shahnameh* used by the researchers, which is described by Behfar (2020), along with its English translation rendered by Arthur George and

Edmond Warner (1905-1923), who translated the first and the most comprehensive English version of *Shahnameh* over twenty years. The English translations are attached to the end of the book.

Using a random sampling technique, fifty CSIs were selected from every ten verses of the first book. This enabled the selection of appropriate cultural items to form the corpus needed for the study. One criterion for collecting the CSIs was to ensure that the items covered a wide range of cultural concepts, based on Newmark's (1988) five areas of CSIs.

The second set of English translations is produced by the AI platform Microsoft Copilot. It is a conversational, AI-powered assistant designed to enhance productivity by providing contextual help, automating tasks, and analyzing data. The reason for choosing this specific chatbot was its broad applicability among Iranian users, without requiring access to premium accounts. This choice also echoes the comparative study by Ed-dali (2024), which found that Copilot 4's literary translation was effective in accuracy, fluency, and the preservation of the original text's lexical features.

The language directionality for both data sources is from Persian into English.

3.2. Procedure

The data included Persian verses from the Shahnameh, as well as English translations by human translators and AI. In the first step of data collection, Persian verses containing CSIs were randomly selected from every ten verses, and their corresponding English translations were identified. Data collection continued until a probable sample of 50 CSIs was gathered and categorized into Newmark's (1988) five categories.

3.3. Data analysis

As argued by Newmark (1988), cultural items are categorized into five areas in which such concepts usually occur: ecology, material culture, social culture, social system, and gestures and habits. Table 1 summarizes five cultural areas and their subtypes. The reason for choosing this model was to ensure comprehensive classification, covering all notions in the Persian book. Another reason was that Newmark's classification reflects cultural categories, whose translation can pose challenges for translators. Hence, it is worth analyzing and assessing.

Table 1. Five areas of CSIs adapted from Newmark's (1988) model

Cultural Area	Subtypes
Ecology	Flora
	Fauna
	Geography
Material Culture	Food
	Clothes

	House & Town
	Transport
Social Culture	Work
	Leisure
Social System	Religious
	Artistic
	Political & Administrative
	Historical
Gestures & Habits	

Subsequently, each English verse containing the CSI was compared with its Persian counterpart. After finding all Persian-English pairs, the type and frequency of translation strategies were specified, drawing on Davies's (2003) model. This model comprises the following seven procedures: Preservation, Addition, Omission, Globalization, Localization, Transformations, and Creation (see Table 2). The model was primarily chosen because it addresses the shortcomings of other models, such as Aixelá (1996) and Newmark (1988), which do not provide a comprehensive list of strategies for cultural concepts.

Next, the selected Persian verses were given to the Microsoft Copilot AI platform, which was tasked with translating each verse into English. The same procedure for specifying strategies was repeated for the AI output to provide a detailed analysis of the two English translations. Afterwards, descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, and total count were provided for each translation strategy.

Table 2. Translation strategies adapted from Davies's (2003) model

Translation Strategy	**Explanation**
Preservation	In this strategy, the ST is preserved in the target culture due to the lack of a close equivalent. It also includes transliterations and borrowed items.
Addition	The original CSI is maintained and supplemented by some explanatory information since translating the concept can lead to obscurity.
Omission	Here, a problematic CSI is omitted without any traces in the translation. It can be due to not finding an adequate equivalent or the lack of justification to present a paraphrase or equivalent.
Globalization	This procedure refers to the replacement of CSIs with more general or neutral concepts to make them accessible to a wider range of audiences with different backgrounds.
Localization	To avoid loss of meaning, translators use a reference familiar to the target culture instead of providing extra descriptions. Opposite to globalization, localization means modifying an item based on the target readership's expectations.
Transformations	When a CSI is modified, an alteration or distortion of the original, it is transformed. It occurs in favor of the target readers' flexibility and tolerance to confront obscurities.
Creation	It is when translators create CSIs that do not exist in ST.

4. Findings

In this section, the findings of a detailed analysis of the translation strategies used by the human translators and AI in the first book of *Shahnameh* are presented. A combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis was used to illustrate the findings in tables and figures. Note that the first English translation in each table row, on the upper side of the Persian verse, is the human translation, while the second English translation in Black is the AI output.

4.1. Preservation

Table 3 displays instances translated using Preservation. This strategy is also referred to by Newmark (1988) as Transference, by Baker (1992) as Translation using Loan Word, and by Aixelá (1996) as Repetition. It is the second most frequently used strategy among human translators (26%) and AI (32%). Preservation is mostly undertaken due to the unavailability of an equivalent or to maintain foreignization in the TL (Setyawan, 2019, p. 3). Geography-related words and characters' names were the most frequent preserved words, including the terms *قنّوج* and *ابوالقاسم*. All these instances have been transliterated into English.

Table 3. Instances of preservation

Persian Verse	CSI	English Translation by Human Translators and AI	Translated CSI
ز قنّوج تا پیش دریای سند	قنّوج	King from Kannuj e'en to the river Sind,	Kannuj
		From Kannauj to the shores of the Indus Sea.	Kannauj
به‌ویژه سپهدار سالار توس	توس	Next is the prince of Tus, a valiant lord	Tus
		Especially the commander, the leader of Tous.	Tous
ابوالقاسم آن شاه پیروزبخت	ابوالقاسم	Abu'l Kasim! this all-victorious one	Abu'l Kasim
		Abu'l-Qasim, that victorious king.	Abu'l-Qasim

In this strategy, the proper names such as حیدر and سده were translated into *Lion* and *Sada*, respectively. They were all capitalized to be distinguished from common names for the target audience. The frequent use of Preservation can be because most CSIs carry a geographical and historical background and do not have a close equivalent in English to be fully and accurately transferred. The usage of this strategy in literary texts offers a local cultural atmosphere (Petrulione, 2012, p. 3). Hence, the translators may have tried to keep the original to make the audience more familiar with the source culture.

Another finding was that human translation and AI output differed in spelling. AI translation seemed to be more accurate, the reason for which can be having access to large corpora.

4.2. Addition

According to Davies, "when simple preservation of the original CSI may lead to obscurity, the translator may decide to keep the original item but supplement the text with whatever information is judged necessary" (Davies, 2003, p. 77). Addition is divided into two groups of "extratextual information" and "intratextual glosses". The former is explained in the footnotes and endnotes, whereas the latter is incorporated in the text (Blažytė & Liubinienė, 2016, p. 6). This strategy was employed only twice by human translators (4%), and no instances were found in AI output. The two instances were accompanied by supplementary information to help the target reader better grasp the semantic components, and the translation loss was avoided. For example, *Shah* was added to the proper name *Jamshid* to implicitly state that he was the king of Iran.

Table 4. Instances of addition

Persian Verse	CSI	English Translation by Human Translators and AI	Translated CSI
ز هر خاشه‌ای خویشتن پرورد	خاشه	They browse upon the briar and the brake,	the briar and the brake
		From every little straw, one nurtures oneself.	straw (Globalization)
سوی تخت جمشید بنهاد روی	جمشید	And having seized the throne of Shah Jamshid	Shah Jamshid
		He set his course toward the throne of Jamshid.	Jamshid (Preservation)

To translate the same CSIs, AI employed a combination of strategies, like Globalization and Preservation. Although AI did not provide intratextual glosses, a complete interpretation of each verse, a historical and cultural background, and an explanation of similes and metaphors were provided in the footnotes. The strategy of preservation alone is more often used for translation of symbolic titles and the words that are repeated in their original form (Petrulione, 2012, p. 6). Therefore, the translator or AI should be able to employ different strategies to achieve the same effect.

One point to be mentioned is that some verses were added to the English version, which do not exist in the original, such as *The lord of win, of honey, and of rill*. These verses do not contain cultural concepts but have been added to improve understanding of the *Shahnameh*.

4.3. Omission

Omission is among the least-used strategies. Both human translators and AI used it only once (2%). In the first instance (see Table 5), the AI platform omitted the item نگارنده; and the translation does not convey the item's intended cultural value. In the second instance, the item هرمز was entirely removed, lacking sufficient accuracy in the translation.

Table 5. Instances of omission

Persian Verse	CSI	English Translation by Human Translators and AI	Translated CSI
نگارنده‌ی برشده‌گوهر است	نگارنده	The Artist of the heaven's jewelry!	the Artist
		The one who has risen is a precious gem.	the one
سر سال نو هرمز فوردین	هرمز	Upon the day the name of New Year's Day,	-
		The beginning of the new year, Hormoz of Farvardin.	Hormoz

The reason for omitting CSIs can be the lack of equivalents in the target culture and the challenges posed to translators or AI, as Dimutriu (2004) points out "when the translator prefers to use Omission, this may be perceived as the translator's failure in rendering the word" (as cited in Öztemel & Kurt, 2017, p. 9). However, she distinguishes the following purposes for using omissions: 1) to present the information concisely; 2) to present essential information (…), and 3) to avoid unnecessary culture, time, and space bumps. Thus, this strategy should not be treated negatively and can be used in the translation of fiction. In such cases, AI performed better because a supplementary explanation was provided for the reader, rather than removing the item entirely and not remaining faithful to the original.

4.4. Globalization

In 26% of cases, human translators used Globalization, while AI used it for 18% of the CSIs, ranking third. For Davies, Globalization is "the process of replacing culture-specific references with ones which are more neutral or general, in the sense that they are accessible to audiences from a wider range of cultural backgrounds" (Davies, 2003, p. 83). Referred to as Universalization by Aixelá (1996) and as Functional Equivalent by Newmark (1988), this strategy removes distinctive features and adds neutral connotations. It usually occurs when translators are unable to find the right equivalent, hence they decide to diminish the original reference (Blažytė & Liubinienė, 2016, p. 8). In all instances, more general terms were used (see Table 6) so that the target readers can more easily identify with the book's flow. Many of these cultural items are particularly valued in Iran, such as قاقم, and do not have exact equivalents in English; thus, the closest term in meaning was employed.

Table 6. Instances of globalization

Persian Verse	CSI	English Translation by Human Translators and AI	Translated CSI
چو روباه و قاقُم چو سنجاب نرم	قاقُم	Such as the squirrel, ermine, fox, and sable,	ermine / sable
		Like a fox and an ermine, soft like a squirrel.	ermine
خرد بهتر از هرچه ایزدت داد	ایزد	As God's best gift to thee extol the worth	God
		Wisdom is better than all that God has given you.	God

به رسم نماز آمدندیش پیش	نماز	Before his throne but bent, as though in prayer,	prayer
		They approached him in the manner of prayer.	prayer

As in instance No. 4, the religious-cultural term ایزد has a specific connotative meaning in Zoroastrianism, so it differs from God (often translated into Persian as خدا or پروردگار). But both translations do not distinguish this semantic difference; thus, they lack sufficient accuracy and transform the intended meaning. Or the special prayer of *نماز* recited by Muslims in instance No. 5 is not translated clearly to be distinguished from other forms of praying.

Another point to note is that English spelling differs from Persian in capitalization. When a word is capitalized, as in *God*, it becomes a proper name and carries more weight than other common words, as in Persian. As a result, some words are more or less valued semantically and can have a different effect on the readers' minds.

4.5. Localization

Opposite to Globalization, Localization is defined as a strategy that is used "to avoid loss of effect" and "instead of aiming for 'culture-free' descriptions, the translators may try to anchor a reference firmly in the culture of the target audience" (Davies, 2003, p. 84). As shown in Table 7, it was the third most frequent strategy among human translators (14%) and the most frequent among AI (38%).

Table 7. Instances of localization

Persian Verse	**CSI**	**English Translation by Human Translators and AI**	**Translated CSI**
سرش راست برشد چو سرو بلند	سرو	With head erect and cypresslike in height,	cypresslike
		His head rose straight, like a tall cypress.	cypress
بدو اندرون زعفران و گلاب	گلاب	A chine of veal with saffron and rosewater,	rosewater
		Within it were saffron and rosewater	rosewater
به گردن برآورد گرز گران	گرز	and took his massive mace	mace
		He raised the heavy mace over his shoulder.	mace

Example No. 1 indicates that translators have sought to create the same atmosphere as in the original. Hence, the neologism *cypresslike* occurred, which could also be labelled under the heading of Creation. The reasons for such word formation might be the lack of an equivalent to transfer the intended meaning or to preserve the rhyme, as in the Persian poem. For this reason, Öztemel and Kurt (2017, p. 15) state that, in localization, the translator aims to create a similar effect to the CSI in ST; however, replicating the same effect may not be possible. Though Localization diminishes the foreignness of CSIs, it domesticates the TT so that readers can better perceive cultural concepts.

4.6. Transformations

Standing at the top of the list is Transformations, the alteration or distortion of the original. Used 28% by human translators and 10% by AI, it refers to cases in which the modification of CSIs goes beyond either Globalization or Localization. Yet, there is no clear distinction between these categories (Davies, 2003, pp. 84-86). Table 8 displays several examples of this strategy, but note that some of these cases can also be labelled under the headings of Globalization and Localization.

Table 8. Instances of transformations

Persian Verse	CSI	English Translation by Human Translators and AI	Translated CSI
خورش کردشان سبزه و کاه و جو	خورش	and made them to feed on barley, grass, and hay	feed on
		He fed them grass, straw, and barley.	Fed
ز بهر سپنجی‌سرای آمدند	سپنجی‌سرای	Of this our Wayside Hostelry was made.	Wayside Hostelry
		They came for the fleeting abode.	fleeting abode (Localization)
چو گرمابه و کاخ‌های بلند	گرمابه	As hot baths, lofty halls, and sanctuaries.	hot baths
		Like a bathhouse and towering palaces.	Bathhouse (Localization)

For example, the term *سپنجیسرای refers to the material world in which human beings reside for a limited time and are expected to leave* for the spiritual world. The human translators preferred a literal translation, which altered the original meaning and diminished the verse's aesthetic value. On the other hand, AI aimed to convey the verse's true meaning, so a familiar target concept was used. In instance No. 5, foreign readers might not be familiar with the concept of گرمابه; thus, the human translators decided to alter it rather than omit it due to difficulties in conveying its meaning (Setyawan, 2019, p. 7).

A point to be highlighted is that most inconsistency between the translation strategies used was Transformations. In many instances, either the human translators or AI preferred other ways to convey the meaning.

4.7. Creation

The last procedure proposed by Davies is Creation. It is when the CSI is created by the translator that does not exist in the original (Davies, 2003, p. 88). No instances of the strategy were observed in both translations.

4.8. Analysis

Fifty CSIs were identified in *Shahnameh* and were categorized into Newmark's (1988) five areas of cultural concepts. Table 9 shows that the most CSIs belong to the Social System-History category (22%), followed by Religion (16%). Geography, Clothes, and Work (10%) were also common. The least frequent categories are Leisure, Art, and Politics & Administrative by only 2%. No instances of Transport were found.

Table 9. Frequency of CSIs in *Shahnameh*

Area of CSI		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Ecology	Flora	2	4%
	Fauna	3	6%
	Geography	5	10%
Material Culture	Food	3	6%
	Clothes	5	10%
	House / Town	3	6%
	Transport	-	-
Social Culture	Work	5	10%
	Leisure	1	2%
Social System	Religion	8	16%
	Art	1	2%
	Politics & Administrative	1	2%
	History	11	22%
Gestures & Habits		2	4%
Total		50	100%

Table 10 presents the frequency and percentage of translation strategies used by human translators and AI for CSIs. According to the table, the most frequently used strategy among human translators was Transformations (28%), whereas AI predominantly used Localization (38%). The strategies of Preservation (26% and 32%) and Globalization (26% and 18%) were also common. Both Addition (4%) and Omission (2%) were among the least used ones, and no instances of Creation were observed.

Table 10. Frequency of translation strategies

Translation Strategy	**Translation of Human Translators**		**Translation of AI**	
	Frequency	**Percentage**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Preservation	13	26%	16	32%
Addition	2	4%	-	-
Omission	1	2%	1	2%
Globalization	13	26%	9	18%
Localization	7	14%	19	38%
Transformations	14	28%	5	10%
Creation	-	-	-	-
Total	50	100%	50	100%

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the distribution of translation strategies in the Persian-to-English translation of *Shahnameh.*

Figure 1. Percentage of translation strategies used by human translators

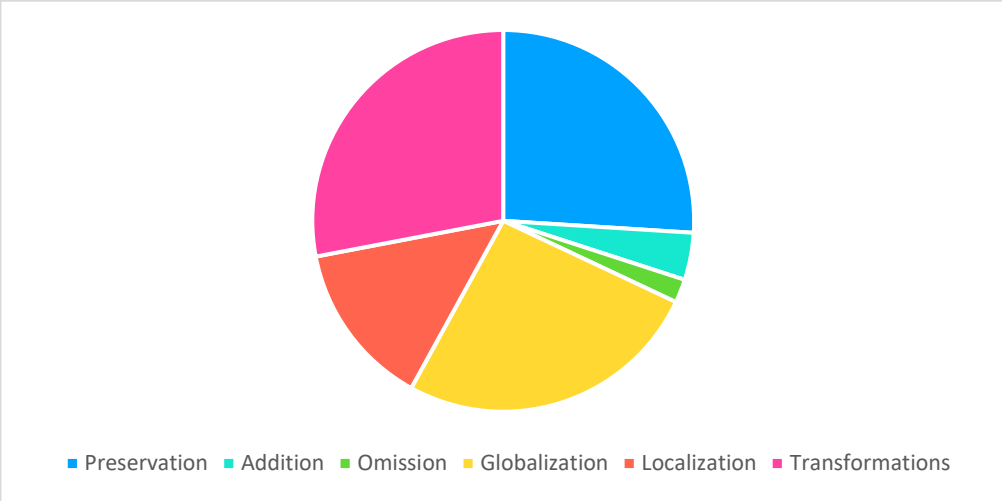
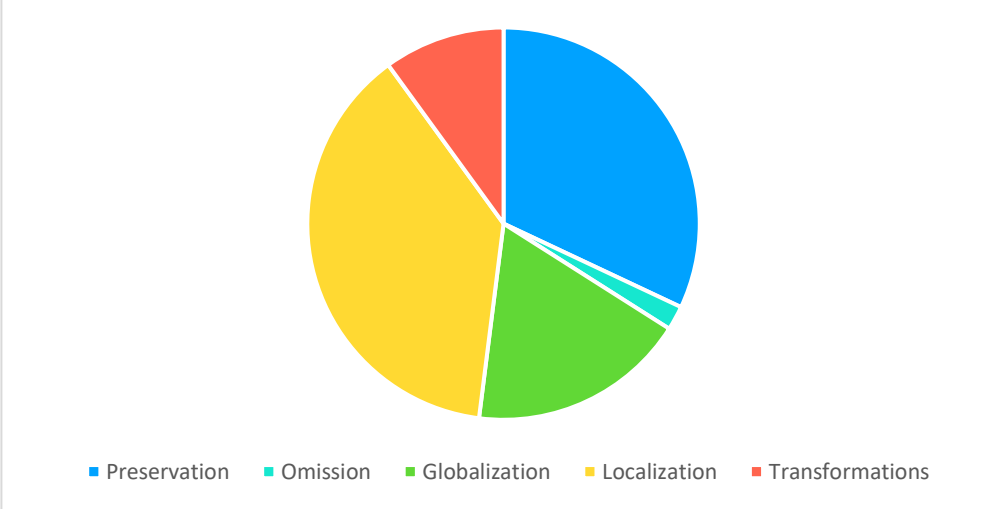


Figure 2. Percentage of translation strategies used by AI



The findings revealed that the order of the verses was not fully observed in the human translation. Several concepts were translated in the preceding or the following verses, while some of them were totally omitted or summarized, especially in the introduction section called دیباچه. On the other side, AI output prioritized content over form; thus, partial equivalents along with detailed explanations were provided. Regarding the rhyme, none of the translations observed it; therefore, content was prioritized over form. Content was

addressed in such detail that the readers might not understand that the poem is composed in rhyming couplets.

Another finding was the punctuation differences between Persian and English. In the former, all the words share an equal level of semantic value, whereas in the latter, some words are written in bold or are capitalized. As a result, some words carry more semantical and pragmatic value, and the emphasis carried by words from the original changes. In terms of punctuation, AI was more accurate in comparison to human translators. Though punctuation differs in the two language systems, AI output was more precise.

Unlike human translators, AI output showed more consistency in translation strategies, particularly for the religious terms such as ایزد and یزدان, which were translated into God. If different strategies are used to translate semantically similar CSIs, the TT lacks sufficient cohesion.

The findings overall indicated that the human translation partly went above Globalization and Localization and partly tried to preserve the original CSIs to make the audience more familiar with Iranian culture. However, AI output tended toward the target readers by localizing most concepts, so that they can better identify with the text. The pattern of translation strategies found aligns closely with earlier studies, including Blažytė and Liubinienė (2016) and Setyawan (2019). In this pattern, most CSIs are either preserved or localized, and no examples of creation were evident.

5. Discussions

The present study investigated the Persian-to-English translation strategies used by human translators and AI for CSIs in *Shahnameh*. The aim was to identify the types and frequencies of CSIs based on Newmark's (1988) five areas of cultural concepts and to determine the types and frequencies of strategies drawing on Davies's (2003) model. We identified Transformations and Localization as the most common strategies for human translators and AI, respectively.

The findings are consistent with many studies conducted previously such as Blažytė and Liubinienė (2016), Öztemel and Kurt (2017), and Setyawan (2019). The study on the English-into-Lithuanian translation has revealed that a combination of strategies was employed in some cases, particularly the strategy of Addition, which was used in conjunction with others or accompanied by a footnote (Petrulione, 2012). As shown by Zhang (2021), the Chinese-to-English translation of a literary novel takes into account the cultural differences between Chinese and English, aiming to bridge the cultural gap in translation. This suggests that the Iranian translators and the AI output bear a close resemblance to those of the Lithuanian and Chinese literary novels, in which a single strategy was often used for translating proper names, and a combination of strategies was employed for most cultural items.

Our study revealed that human translation tends to be longer and more complex by using obsolete terminology and structures, while AI output was shorter and simpler for the modern reader. This is in line with Fu andLiu's (2024) study, in which they concluded that human translation exhibits lengthier texts

with a lower average word diversity at the lexical level, while GenAI translation presents higher accuracy and proficiency in translating terminology.

According to the frequencies of the most applied strategies, Transformations and Localization by human translators and AI were at the top, respectively. Both procedures fall under Venuti's (1995) category of Domestication, in which target readers can better identify with target cultural concepts. Similarly, Fouladi and Hashemi (2025) revealed that the official Iranian game localization agency tended to tone down the force and effect of the original taboo language by deleting, neutralizing, or at least mitigating certain elements. Employing strategies of Euphemism and Deletion as the most common methods reflects a preference for softening or omitting offensive language to meet cultural standards, which aligns well with Domestication strategies described by Venuti (1995).

The findings indicated that Preservation was the second most common strategy, both for human translators and AI. The same pattern was observed in Setyawan's (2019) study, in which the Indonesian translation of CSIs was sought. The frequent use of this strategy is understandable, especially for historical and religious terms such as *Abu'l-Qasim*, *Tous*, and *Hormoz*, to keep the original as they are already popular terms. As indicated by Afrouz (2022), the categories of concrete religious concepts, religious verdicts, and abstract religious concepts pose the greatest challenges to translators; thus, they were mostly preserved in the study. The reason translators deemed such a category a potential challenge for their TT readers underlines the fact that religious proper names have allusive references which can be conveyed to the readers via explanatory footnotes.

As shown by Mohammadi and Keshavarzi (2015), proper names were among the culturally untranslatable items in the story of *Rustam and Sohrab* and its equivalent English translation. These names included common nouns, name of places, and name of persons; thus, nouns are the most frequently found cultural untranslatable elements in the translation. Of these nouns, personal proper names include 51.3% of cultural untranslatable elements as the most frequent category. In our study, most of the religious and historical items, including personal names, were untranslated, the reason for which can be the rigid models of culture or language and the unique style of *Shahnameh*.

The studies on Turkish-into-English translation of CSIs, including Blažyte andLiubinienė (2016) who demonstrated which translation strategies are preferred to deal with CSIs in literary translation, showed that cultural items were adapted with small changes through Preservation according to the target culture's phonological and orthographic rules, parallel to Aixelá's (1996) Orthographic Adaptation and Venuti's (1995) Foreignization. This is the same as AI's function in using Preservation, in which original references were adapted to the target language's spelling through procedures like transcription and transliteration.

However, our findings were inconsistent with the results of Pagrandyte and Astrauskiene (2021) and Amenador and Wang (2022). These studies, in particular, focused on the translation of cultural concepts in animations and food menus, which allows for some comparison. After examining the translation of CSIs in Lithuanian-dubbed animated films in the former study, it was found that the translators of the selected films tended to apply Foreignization more extensively than Domestication. In the latter study,

the Chinese-to-English translation of CSIs was investigated in food menus. In any case, Neutralizing procedures were used more frequently than procedures of Foreignization and Domestication, even if they analyze other figurative devices such as metaphors, polysemous CSIs, and false friends. In contrast, the most frequent strategies in the present study, Transformations and Localizations, both fall under Venuti's (1995) Domestication.

As argued by Elkins (2024), AI platforms, such as GPTo and Mistral, can help surface elements of a translation that may not be visible using a traditional close reading method. Patterns of lexical richness alongside differences in emotional arc are likely to give rise to a significantly different reading experience. This contradicts our findings which showed that Microsoft Copilot was successful in rendering most of the cultural concepts embedded in the text either through in-text procedures or by providing additional footnotes. Hence, a deeper translation was provided for target readers.

Finally, Davies argued that there is no consensus among translators in deciding on the most proper translation strategy. A problematic CSI can be preserved and explained in a footnote by one translator, or omitted by another. These differences indicate the varying conventions and audience expectations in the target culture. He believes that it is best to assess a particular CSI based on its contribution to the overall textual effect, not in isolation (Davies, 2003, p. 96). According to Afrouz (2022), translators alter their procedures depending on the situation and do not prefer the consistent usage of one single procedure for rendering all items embedded in a work. Karaban and Karaban (2024) believe that mistakes by AI are often technical and can be refined with model iterations and editing, especially areas like enhanced cultural and dialectal data training might offer improvements. Therefore, further exploration of translation strategies and the potential of AI platforms might shed light on poetry translation in LLMs.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed at identifying the type and frequency of CSIs in *Shahnameh* and the type and frequency of Persian-to-English translation strategies used by the human translators and AI. After comparing and contrasting the strategies, it was revealed that Transformations (28% by humans) and Localization (38% for AI) were the most frequent strategies. The reason for this can be that Microsoft Copilot interprets the verses rather than observing the content or form, since all the verses are accompanied by interpretations. Preservation and Globalization (26%) were also among the common strategies. However, no instances of Creation were observed.

The research contributes to the field of translation by offering a perspective on the function of AI in poetry translation, especially epic poetry. It can shed light on the quality and extent of AI assistance in the translation process and the inclusion of AI in literary translation curricula. It also fills the gap of investigating the cultural heritage of *Shahnameh*, which is not addressed in similar studies.

Nevertheless, the limitations of the study should be carefully observed. Due to the vast number of verses in *Shahnameh*, not all the cultural items could be investigated. The study can only rely on a total of fifty

CSIs. In the study, only one AI platform was assigned to translate the verses; thus, the results cannot be generalized to other chatbots. Future studies could explore the translation of other literary devices in *Shahnameh*, including similes and puns. Future research might also investigate if the same pattern of strategies is replicated in other AI platforms or other language pairs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Intercultural Communication between Afghanistan and Turkey (2001–2021): Dimensions, Challenges, and Prospects

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Abstract

Intercultural relations between Afghanistan and Turkey were officially established in 1921 with the signing of a bilateral agreement and have since fluctuated. This study aims to examine the elements, challenges, and opportunities of intercultural communication (IC) during the Afghan republican period within the framework of acculturation theory. The research used thematic analysis and involved coding data from responses to a semi-structured questionnaire from 12 university lecturers and cultural activists. The five main themes identified as central to this IC are: "Turkish scholarships", "translation of works", "Turkish visual media", "the establishment of Turkish schools in Afghanistan", and "joint cultural programs". The findings emphasize the need for convergence between the two countries and identify the one-sided nature of communication flows and Afghanistan's limited role in representing its own culture as the primary challenges. The results indicate that IC's success depends on cultural policies that strengthen integration while reducing cultural marginalization.

Keywords

education, scholarship, cultural product, academic institute, media, acculturation

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1. Introduction

Afghanistan and Turkey, as two independent countries with distinct national interests, have distinct political and cultural positions and objectives at the regional level, and these cultural differences among their peoples are also clearly visible at the national level. For a long time, relations between Afghanistan and Turkey have occurred across broad, interest-driven, and varied political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Although Jalal al-Din Rumi did not establish formal cultural relations between the two countries, his poetry and Sufi teachings created a shared cultural and spiritual legacy between them. Rumi, a significant figure in Persian literature and culture, was born in Balkh and died in Konya (Lewis, 2000; Foruzanfar, 2007). Therefore, the life of this great mystic in Konya and his birth in Balkh can be considered the most prominent and oldest cultural bridge between the people of the two countries—a bridge that is regarded as an important factor in strengthening cultural relations between the two countries (Mosleh, 2014; Javid, 2012).

Before the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in October 1923, the Ottoman Empire, during its final century of existence, had established relations with Afghanistan (Bishku, 2020). However, modern cultural relations between Afghanistan and Turkey began in 1921 with the signing of a cultural agreement, based on which dozens of students, including several girls, were sent to Turkey for higher education in 1923. In return, some Turkish teachers were dispatched to Afghanistan to train the army (Gregorian, 1969; Adamec, 2003; Kaya, 2017). In 1919, Afghan King Amanullah commenced a decade-long reform movement modeled after Atatürk's in Turkey (Bishku, 2020). Between 1920 and 1960, Turkey "supported Afghanistan's modernization efforts and played a crucial role in the establishment of modern state structures and public institutions in the fields of administration, military, culture, education, and health" (Bishku, 2020, p. 245).

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the ensuing civil war among the mujahedin warlords, Turkey, despite its ethnic ties to the Uzbeks, emphasized national reconciliation (Bishku, 2020). In addition, Turkey has provided training for female Afghan soldiers at a high school for the Turkish police in Sivas (Rahmani, 2018). After the 9/11 attacks and the fall of the Taliban, Turkey participated in, and at times led, NATO operations (Bishku, 2020).

From 2001 to 2021, the governments of Afghanistan and Turkey sought to strengthen diplomatic relations while simultaneously fostering cultural ties. Establishing Turkish schools in Afghanistan, facilitating Afghan students' education in Turkey, and broadcasting and publishing Turkish TV series in Afghanistan have been among Turkey's cultural initiatives.

Turkey is at the top of the list of countries preferred by Afghan youths for education. According to the Ministry of National Education's report on students of foreign nationality receiving scholarships for the academic year 2015-16, 2,949 students of Afghan citizenship attended various universities in Turkey for language preparation and to pursue undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees (Bek, 2018). In recent years, Turkey has continued to play an active role in education, health, and infrastructure. However,

political developments in Afghanistan and changes in international relations may affect these collaborations (Bishku, 2020).

Over the last year, TIKA opened a research center dedicated to the poet and Sufi mystic Mevlana Jalal-Din Rumi at Parwan University in Charikar, Afghanistan, and has engaged in 1,056 projects in Afghanistan since 2004 (TIKA, 2018; Bishku, 2020). In April 2018, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım visited Kabul, where he stated, "We are so glad that Afghan Turkish friendship is not limited to security, but it also increasingly continues in the fields of education, defense, trade, infrastructure, and other fields of life (Uslu, 2018; Bishku, 2020, p. 246).

These persistent efforts, which maintain the foundations of relations between the two countries from a cultural perspective, are studied in communication under the term "intercultural communication (IC)". IC refers to the exchange of information and ideas between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, including differences in language, religion, social norms, and education. This form of communication encompasses a wide range of interactions, processes, and potential conflicts that arise in multicultural environments. The discipline has roots in anthropology and gained prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century, notably as globalization increased migration, tourism, and cultural exchanges (Popan, 2024). As a result of these reciprocal cultural interactions, the tastes, desires, demands, and expectations of individuals across cultures become more similar, and the relations between subcultures and general cultures are strengthened (Rezaei & Zohrei, 2010).

The researcher, while emphasizing the importance of IC in strengthening national convergence, seeks to examine the foundations and nature of IC in the two countries and, in this light, identify the challenges and opportunities of IC between them, given their long-standing history of interaction. Accordingly, the present research is significant in that, while referring to the role of IC in strengthening relations between the two countries through cultural and ideological mechanisms, it presents the contexts, challenges, and opportunities for improving IC between Afghanistan and Turkey for the country's cultural agents.

Communication, as a newly emerging academic discipline in Afghanistan, requires numerous scientific studies to establish a scholarly body of literature. Although a few studies have examined IC in Afghanistan (Safi et al., 2023; Bebitov, 2025), these studies, while theoretical, have not systematically addressed IC between Afghanistan and Turkey in a field-based manner. Therefore, the present research examines the components, elements, and dimensions of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey over the past two decades from the perspectives of academics and cultural practitioners, to help fill gaps in the existing scientific and research literature and to raise new issues for future researchers.

On the other hand, this research has practical significance for the country's cultural practitioners in identifying the contexts, challenges, opportunities, and strategies for cultural relations between Afghanistan and Turkey. In line with the significance and necessity mentioned above, the following questions have been designed to guide the study and to explain the components, challenges, and prospects of IC between the two countries, ensuring that the research maintains its main direction and remains within the defined objectives.

1. What have been the main components of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey from 2001 to 2021?

2. What opportunities and challenges exist in strengthening and consolidating IC between Afghanistan and Turkey?

3. What are the key aspects of the outlook of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey?

To address the above questions, the researchers have formulated the following objectives: to design a systematic framework for identifying the main components, challenges, and outlook of IC across the two countries during the Republican period, and to enhance the reader's theoretical and practical understanding of it.

i. The main objective of the research is to identify the main elements of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey over the past two decades.

ii. To identify the opportunities and challenges of IC between Turkey and Afghanistan over the past two decades from the perspective of acculturation theory.

iii. Examining the outlook and future of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey is another objective of this research.

2. Literature review

In this section, the study addresses two main topics: first, Acculturation theory, which serves as the theoretical framework for the current research and helps us understand the cultural relations between the two countries over the two decades; and second, IC, which forms the conceptual framework of the study.

2.1. Acculturation theory

Acculturation is widely regarded as one of the most important and accepted theories in the field of communication and culture, referring to the process of adjusting to a new culture (Brown, 1987). Acculturation is a sociocultural process that occurs when groups with different sociocultural patterns come into direct contact and live closely together. Acculturation overlaps in many aspects with socialization; however, since this process occurs within an individual's own culture after initial socialization, it can be considered a form of re-socialization or secondary socialization (Berry, 2007a)

To date, several theories have been developed to describe acculturation, among which researchers in the field of culture have highlighted Berry's (2007b) theory. According to this scholar, a fundamental choice exists for groups or individuals exposed to a foreign culture, based on which they decide how to interact with others: whether to engage or maintain cultural distance. Based on how an individual responds to this question, introduces four different acculturation strategies: assimilation, the individual submits themselves to the majority culture and leaves no room for retaining their own values; separation, the

individual refuses to accept the majority culture and continues to preserve their own values; integration, the individual maintains their own culture while also adopting elements from the majority culture; and marginalization, the individual pays no attention to either their own culture or the majority culture. The discussion of acculturation not only describes changes through different strategies but also, closely related to this, addresses the essence of acculturation itself. The essence of change is adaptation, which manifests across physical, biological, social, and psychological domains and determines how an individual responds to change and adopts an acculturation strategy.

For non-dominant ethnocultural groups, orientations to these issues intersect to define four acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. When individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures, the assimilation strategy is defined. In contrast, when individuals value maintaining their original culture and wish to avoid interaction with others, the separation alternative is defined. When there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance (often due to enforced cultural loss) and little interest in engaging with others (often due to exclusion or discrimination), marginalization occurs. Finally, when there is an interest in both maintaining one's original culture and engaging in daily interactions with other groups, the Integration strategy is defined (Berry, 2007). Assimilation occurs when individuals adopt the dominant group's culture, often at the expense of their original cultural identities. Integration involves maintaining one's culture while participating in the dominant culture. Separation refers to preserving the original culture while avoiding interaction with the dominant culture, and marginalization occurs when individuals are disconnected from both their original and dominant cultures (Yoo, 2021).

Within the theoretical framework, intercultural interactions between Afghanistan and Turkey can be analyzed in such a way that individuals and groups, depending on the degree of acceptance of the host culture and the preservation of their own culture, adopt strategies of assimilation, separation, integration, or marginalization, each leading to different psychological and social outcomes.

2.2. Intercultural communication

IC is an emerging scientific orientation that studies the languages, social characteristics, thought patterns, and cultures of different human groups. In fact, IC is considered an important and valuable scientific field for understanding the cultures, languages, and customs of people in various countries. However, this phenomenon has been conceptualized in various ways, emphasizing its complexity as a process of negotiating meanings across cultural differences. Researchers have approached this phenomenon from various perspectives, including the presence of individuals, normative conditions, cultural boundaries, and actors' roles. Based on this assumption, Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2007, p. 416) consider it a "process of negotiation across individuals and groups". In this process, normative differences play an important role, as Stewart (as cited in Hmala, 2022, p. 26) describes it as "communication which occurs under conditions of cultural difference—language, values, customs, and habit". These communications also reflect cultural differences in how we perceive external phenomena, which is consistent with Novinger's (2001, p. 13) view that IC involves "cultural variance in the perception of social objects and events."

The study of IC requires intercultural understanding, which involves appreciating and valuing cultural differences. Language is an important cultural component related to intercultural understanding. IC is, in a way, an equal interaction with speakers of other languages and respect for other identities. IC, in its broadest sense, occurs when a member of one culture sends a message to a member of another culture. This communication occurs at various levels, including individual-to-individual relationships, individual-to-national culture, cultures within society, and national cultures across societies. At the transnational level, during cultural interactions, individuals are exposed to other cultural values, initiating a reflective process that leads to positive interactions between people and cultures. Consequently, through these interactions, the tastes, desires, demands, and expectations of individuals across cultures become more similar, and the relationships between subcultures and mainstream cultures are strengthened (Rezaei & Zohrei, 2010).

In any case, IC occurs among people whose cultural institutions and symbolic systems are sufficiently distinct to alter the communication event, and this happens when the source and receiver of the message belong to different races or ethnicities (Samovar, 2000, p. 104). IC is created and strengthened through various channels, and examples of these relations at national and international levels include issues such as the exchange of books, publications, films, sports teams and competitions, media programs, scholarships, organization of scientific and cultural seminars, and so on (Rezaei & Zohrei, 2010). In IC, it is essential to recognize the value of each culture, as cultures are multidimensional and shape individuals' behavior in different ways. Understanding values is the foundation for understanding and comparing people and IC. Recognizing values is essential for understanding the logic and causes of individuals' and nations' behavior. The root of most aggressive behaviors originating in a nation lies in that nation's values (Kamalipour, 2003). In a general summary, "IC can be considered as communication between a communicator and a receiver who belong to two different cultures; hence, in this type of communication, the 'other' exists in various forms such as religion, race, and ethnicity" (Bashir & Shoa'ei Shahrza, 2017).

3. Method

The present study, conducted to examine the views of cultural practitioners and university lecturers regarding ICs between Afghanistan and Turkey, employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured questionnaires. Qualitative research is particularly relevant to the study of social relations due to the pluralization of the lifeworld (Flick, 2009).

3.1. Data collection

Data for this study were obtained from two primary sources. First, a review of relevant scholarly research on IC was conducted to develop the theoretical framework and literature review, which also informed the design of the questionnaire. Second, a semi-structured questionnaire comprising eight open-ended questions was designed and distributed via social media to university lecturers and cultural activists in Afghanistan to collect original empirical data. Participants, selected for their experience and expertise,

provided detailed and in-depth responses to the questions. The theoretical saturation criterion was used to assess the adequacy of the data. The questionnaire addressed the key areas of IC between the two countries. All ethical considerations were fully observed throughout the study. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their information, and their anonymity was maintained throughout the research.

3.2. Data analysis

In this study, thematic analysis was used to analyze data from semi-structured questionnaires. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. At a minimum, this method organizes the data and provides detailed descriptions. In general, a theme is a recurring and distinctive feature in the text that, in the researcher's view, reflects a particular understanding and experience related to the research questions (King & Horrocks, 2010, as cited in Jafari et al., 2011).

Data analysis and theme development were conducted inductively. This means the researcher extracted themes from participants' responses, and no predefined theoretical framework was used at this stage. To ensure coding reliability, all codes and themes were carefully reviewed multiple times, and consultations were held with a colleague familiar with thematic analysis, with necessary adjustments made. Additionally, theoretical saturation was used to ensure that the main themes adequately reflected the interviewees' perspectives.

For data analysis, all responses were first transcribed verbatim and reviewed. The researcher read the responses multiple times to become familiar with the content and identify serious and meaningful discussions related to IC between Afghanistan and Turkey. In the next stage, initial coding of the responses was conducted, and similar codes were grouped to form basic themes. In the third stage, the extracted basic themes were developed into organizing themes that represent broader, more meaningful patterns. This stage enabled the identification of participants' recurring ideas and perspectives.

In the final stage of the research method, a thematic network was created to structure the research findings clearly. For this purpose, organizing themes were combined into global themes that reflect the participants' main experiences and views. In the thematic network map, the meaningful relationships among basic themes, organizing themes, and global statements are displayed, providing a clear overview of the perspectives of university lecturers and cultural activists regarding IC between Afghanistan and Turkey over the past two decades.

3.3. Participants

The population of this study consists of cultural practitioners and university lecturers in literature and journalism who have been active in the country's culture, media, and literature for at least 10 years. Among them, the researcher selected 20 individuals and sent them the questionnaire; 12 participants returned complete, comprehensive, and convincing responses, thereby achieving theoretical saturation.

In this study, a non-probability purposive sampling method was employed. To achieve the research aim, the researcher obtained in-depth, comprehensive responses from four journalism lecturers, four language and literature lecturers, and four cultural activists, totaling 12 participants.

In this section, information about the interviewees under study is presented by gender, age, level of education, and field of study, along with the researcher's assigned code for each interviewee. In Table 1 below, the letters A, B, C, … refer to each of the interviewees in this study.

Table 1. Information about the participants

Code	Occupation	Age	Gender	Field of Study	Education
a	Lecturer of Literature	32	Male	Persian Literature	Master
b	Lecturer of Literature	30	Male	Pashto Literature	Master
c	Lecturer of Literature	30	Female	Persian Literature	Bachelor
d	Professor of Literature	47	Male	Persian Literature	PhD
e	Cultural Activist	29	Female	Sociology	Bachelor
f	Cultural Activist	33	Female	Sociology	Bachelor
g	Cultural Activist	34	Male	International Relations	Bachelor
h	Lecturer of Journalism	30	Male	Journalism	Bachelor
i	Lecturer of Journalism	28	Female	Journalism	Bachelor
j	Lecturer of Journalism	33	Female	Communication	Master
k	Cultural Activist	30	Male	Literature	Bachelor
l	Lecturer of Journalism	34	Male	Communication	Master

4. Findings

In the first step, the researcher sent the research questions to 20 university professors and cultural activists in the country via social media (WhatsApp and Messenger) to conduct an in-depth study of the main elements, challenges, and outlook of IC between the two countries, in light of the theoretical framework. After multiple contacts with the participants, the researcher received 12 clear, comprehensive, and precise responses. The participants' responses were collected, organized, and summarized by question, leading to the conclusion that they could be categorized into four groups: components, challenges, opportunities, and the outlook of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey.

After coding the interviews, four main themes and thirty-seven sub-themes were identified, as presented in Table 2. The four main themes extracted from their perspectives are: components, challenges, opportunities, and the outlook of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey. Based on the views of university professors and cultural activists, this study highlights five fundamental components of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey, which include: the academic role of Turkey through awarding scholarships to

Afghan citizens; broadcasting Turkish series and television programs in Afghan media; translation and interpretation of Turkish books into Persian and vice versa; Turkey's cooperation in the construction of administrative and educational facilities at universities; and the establishment of Afghan-Turk schools as well as the increase in production and sale of Turkish goods. A detailed analysis of these findings is provided in Table 2 below, which examines key patterns, recurring themes, and their implications for intercultural relations between the two countries.

Table 2. Main and sub-themes of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey from 2001 to 2021

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Initial Coding
Components of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey	Scholarships	Approximately 500 Afghan students study in Turkey each year through scholarships.
		The Turkish government has provided official scholarships for the Ministry of Higher Education (staff and university professors).
		Political parties of the country have also received scholarships.
	Translation and Explanation of Books	Translation and explanation of Rumi's *Masnavi* into Turkish.
		Translation of the book *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak into Persian.
		Book exchanges between Turkey and Afghanistan as a cultural activity.
	TV Series and Films	Broadcasting Turkish series on reputable private media in Afghanistan.
		Broadcasting Turkish music on national radio stations.
		Replacing Indian TV series with Turkish television programs.
		Reproducing Turkish culture through cinematic works in Afghan society.
	Production and Sale of Turkish Products	Changes in clothing trends through the production of Turkish-style clothes.
		Establishment of cafés in the style of Turkish coffeehouses.
		Changes in the Afghan lifestyle through imitation of the Turkish way of life.
	Academic Institutions	Establishment of a Turkish language department building at Kabul University.
		Teaching Turkish language and literature in some Afghan universities.
		Operation of Afghan-Turk schools in key provinces of Afghanistan.
		Construction of a library for Shaheed Professor Rabbani Education University.
		Strengthening the Turkish language through private educational institutions in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, and other provinces.
Challenges of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey	One-way Nature of IC	Lack of Afghan cultural activities in Turkey.
		Need to broadcast Afghan series and films in Turkey.
		Formation of vertical (top-down) communication between Turkey and Afghanistan.
		Lack of familiarity of Turkish citizens with the Persian or Pashto languages.

		Lack of familiarity of Afghan citizens with the Turkish language.
Opportunities for IC between Turkey and Afghanistan	Facilitating Cultural Activities for Afghan Migrants in Turkey	The Turkish government can provide opportunities for migrants in Turkey to learn Turkish.
		Necessity of accepting Afghan migrants in Turkish cultural and educational institutions.
		Facilitating the celebration and preservation of Afghan cultural rituals and customs in Turkish cities.
		Organizing workshops and scientific seminars.
	Joint Cultural Activities	Holding joint cultural conferences on Rumi (Jalaluddin Balkhi).
		Student and cultural innovation exchanges between Afghanistan and Turkey.
		Organizing programs and seminars on the cultural and historical commonalities of Turkey and their role in strengthening the bond between the two nations.
		Facilitating tourism to familiarize themselves with the archaeological sites and historical foundations of both countries.
	Sport	Organizing friendly sports competitions between Afghanistan and Turkey.
		Training Afghan athletes by Turkish coaches in Turkey and Afghanistan.
		Facilitating travel and tourism of Turkish and Afghan athletes in both countries.
		Achieving understanding, values, and common goals through the reproduction of national cultures during sports competitions.
Outlook of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey	Formation of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey	Convergence between the Turkish and Afghan nations.
		Strengthening and consolidating the cultural relationship between the two countries.
		Achieving cultural commonalities.
		Mutual understanding between the two nations.
		Bilateral relations between the Afghan and Turkish people.
		Exchange of cultural and produced goods.
		Solidarity between Afghanistan and Turkey.

4.1. Components of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey

4.1.1. Academic role and scholarships

According to respondents, student admissions through scholarships are a fundamental component of IC. Turkey is one of the countries that, between 2001 and 2021, attracted a significant number of Afghan students across various academic fields and degrees. With this cultural strategy, the Turkish government, on the one hand, fostered academic cooperation with the Afghan government and people, and, on the other hand, introduced Afghan graduates to Turkish culture. Currently, graduates who studied in Turkey are familiar with Turkish culture and social relations, speak Turkish, and understand Turkey's political and cultural power and status in the world. Sem Sey, an independent journalist who lived in Kabul from

2012 to 2016, writes in an article titled "Turkey in Afghanistan: a Successful Stakeholder but a Serious Partner" published in SWP Comments about Turkey's cultural role in Afghanistan:

> Turkey is striving to establish special relations between the peoples of the two countries. TIKA gifted a new building for the Turkish Studies Department at Kabul University. In addition, Turkey awards 500 scholarships annually to those interested in pursuing higher education there, and it is the only country, alongside India, that accepts the largest number of Afghan students (Sey & Seufert, 2016).

4.1.2. Book translation

The second influential cultural component of communication between the two countries in recent years has been the translation of works from Turkish into Persian and vice versa. The explanation and translation of original and distinguished Persian-language works in Turkey are considered a practical manifestation of IC in today's era. As Noam Chomsky, the American linguist, notes, translation plays a significant and sustainable role in cultural circulation in the contemporary world. The Turkish translation and explanation of Rumi's Masnavi by Suleyman Nahifi and Dr. Ali Gzelpour can be considered a masterpiece in the field of IC. Accordingly, Rumi studies programs, attended by researchers, Rumi scholars, and photographers from around the world, are held annually in Turkey, given Rumi's prominent global position and his tomb there. Another notable example is the book The Forty Rules of Love by the distinguished Turkish-English author Elif Shafak, published in Turkish in 2010, which gained international recognition by focusing on Rumi's life.

4.1.3. Films and TV series

According to the research participants, the third cultural element in communication between the two countries is the broadcasting and dissemination of Turkish cinematic works, such as films and TV series. This indicates that Turkey's cultural presence in Afghanistan is not limited to the educational field; through its cinematic and television products, it has entered the homes of many Afghans. Turkish TV series in Afghanistan have many fans. Currently, a significant portion of Afghan television entertainment programs (films and series) consists of family, cultural, and social series.

The broadcasting of Turkish series and films in the country has limited the influence of Indian TV series and cinematic works. At present, the culture of clothing, urban lifestyle, social behaviors, communications, dining habits, and speech of Turkish people has been institutionalized in Afghanistan through notable sequences in feature films and TV series. Following the broadcast of these series and cinematic works, the Afghan market, fashion, purchasing, and consumption patterns have increasingly oriented toward Turkish brands and products.

4.1.4. Establishment of Afghan-Turk schools

The respondents in this study believe that, alongside admitting students from Afghanistan, Turkey has also operated several Turkish-language schools under the name "Afghan-Turk Schools" in some provinces for many years. In these schools, alongside rigorous education and contemporary subjects taught by competent teachers, Turkish culture, language, and literature are also taught as a key component of IC. Afghan-Turk Schools operate in provinces such as Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Sheberghan, Herat, and Kandahar, and have gained popularity among the country's youth.

4.1.5. Production and sale of Turkish products

According to the participants, the growing presence of Turkish cultural goods (Turkish clothing, household items, cafés, and gathering centers modeled after Turkish ones) is another important element that has taken hold in Afghanistan. The increase in production and formation of these goods can be considered a consequence of Turkish films and the return of Afghan refugees and migrants from Turkey.

Overall, the above elements are considered part of Turkey's cultural promotion efforts. The respondents believe that, with increased production and sales of Turkish clothing and goods, the country's dress style has changed. Similarly, the establishment of Turkish-style cafés and coffeehouses in the capital has changed public perception and lifestyle.

4.2. Challenges of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey

Since communication is a two-way, reciprocal human process, it can be disrupted or distorted by various social, structural, environmental, and other factors. In interpersonal communication, environmental noise or lack of mutual understanding are considered fundamental challenges, whereas in mass communication, the absence of common ground, misunderstanding of the media message due to illiteracy, or the complexity of the media message are among the main factors.

The participants identified the one-way nature of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey as one of the most fundamental challenges. The lack of cultural activities from Afghanistan in Turkey was considered by the participants a primary challenge. They believe that cultural actors, institutions, and diplomatic bodies in Turkey should showcase Afghan industries, cultural productions, and literary values. The respondents emphasized that a balanced IC between Afghanistan and Turkey can be achieved only when, instead of vertical (top-down) communication, reciprocal, mutually equal communication is established and strengthened.

4.3. Opportunities for IC between Afghanistan and Turkey

4.3.1. Holding joint cultural programs

The respondents of this study identified the organization of joint cultural programs as a key opportunity. In their view, focusing on shared cultural themes through scientific-cultural symposia, educational and cultural conferences, and the publication and dissemination of scientific articles, with the moral and material support of both countries, is among the most important means to realize the opportunities already available. The second domain in this area is recognized as sports. Sports are also considered a fundamental aspect of IC.

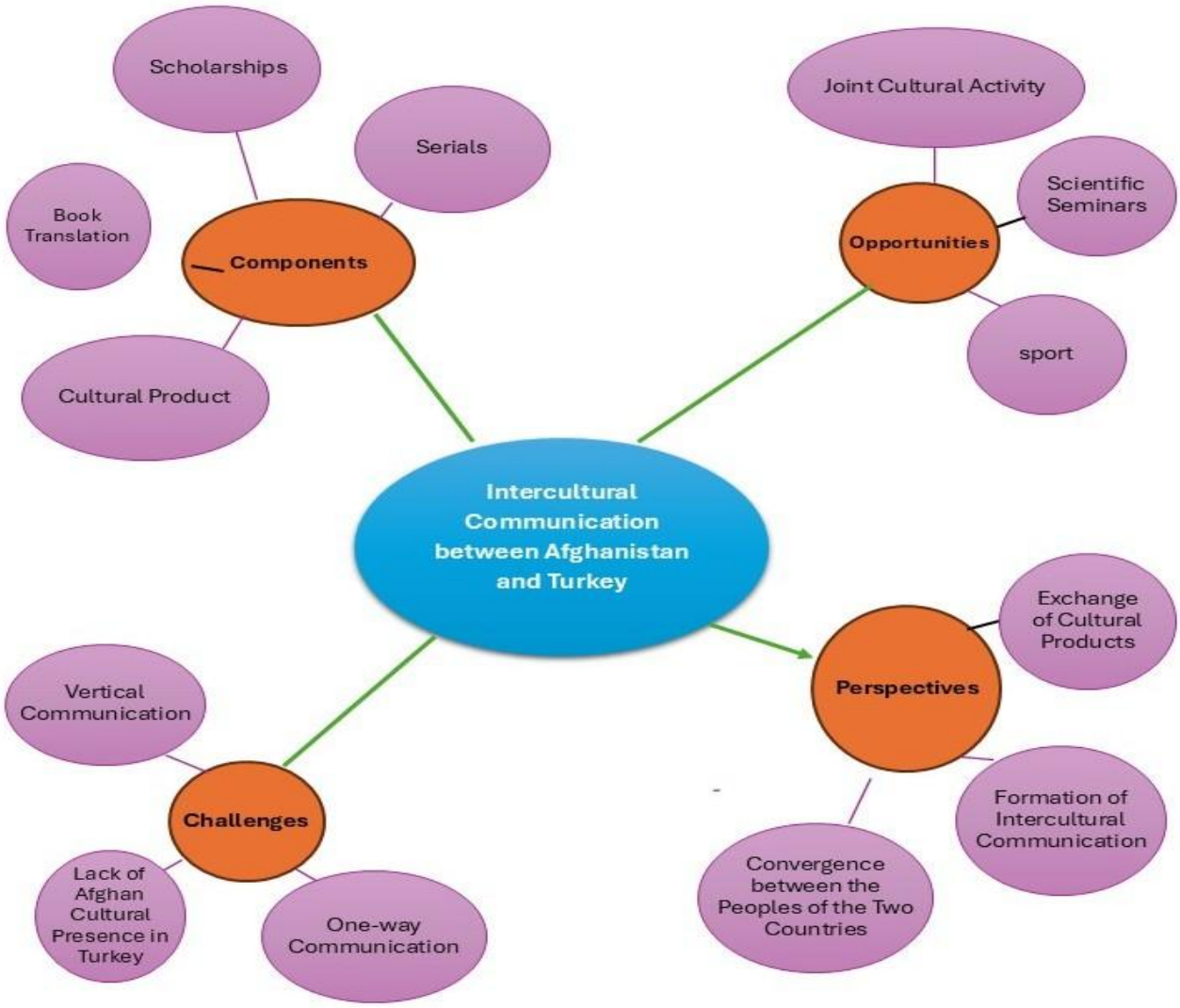
4.3.2. Sports

According to the participants, since "the role of sports in international affairs and fostering mutual understanding among different nations is increasingly evident," strengthening sports competitions between the two countries is regarded as an opportunity for IC between Afghanistan and Turkey.

4.3.3. Outlook of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey

The respondents' statements indicate that if bilateral communication between Afghanistan and Turkey is established and sustained, a clear outlook can emerge from this interaction. According to them, convergence between the Turkish and Afghan peoples, as well as the strengthening and consolidation of relations between the two nations, are among the positive outcomes of this communication. They further stated that promoting and strengthening IC between Afghanistan and Turkey fosters empathy between the two peoples and ultimately highlights their cultural commonalities.

Figure 1. Thematic network (components, challenges, opportunities, and outlook of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey)



5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate the multilayered nature of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey during 2001–2021, a period when Afghanistan maintained relations with countries worldwide and in the region, including Turkey, with support from the international community, the United States, Europe, and NATO. This period, marked by significant political, social, and cultural developments, saw changes including governmental reforms, the relative stabilization of state institutions, and foreign policies related to regional relations, which created the conditions for cultural interaction between Afghanistan and Turkey. Although the two countries had prior cultural relations and interactions, the selected timeframe enabled a systematic, in-depth, and focused examination of IC, thereby highlighting not only the components of communication but also the structural and social factors influencing cultural interactions between the two nations.

With emphasis on Berry's acculturation theory, which includes four fundamental elements (integration, assimilation, marginalization, and separation), the findings of the present study can be interpreted accordingly. Scholarship programs and the admission of Afghan students to Turkey, which facilitate cultural and linguistic connections for students within Turkey's social structure, represent a pattern of integration. In other words, scholarship students maintain their Afghan cultural identity while also adopting aspects of Turkish culture, and in the future, they serve as cultural mediators between the two countries. This finding aligns with Salihoğlu's (2025) findings. The researcher found that students are open to Turkish culture while maintaining their own cultural identities.

The findings also refer to Afghanistan's limited efforts and the one-sided communication between the two countries, which align with Berry's marginalization pattern. However, in this interaction, the element of separation is less evident, as Afghan actors during this period sought engagement and closeness with Turkey while still preserving their original culture. Based on the findings, Afghanistan has made limited efforts to introduce its culture in Turkey, and this one-sided communication reflects Berry's assimilation pattern, enacted by Afghan students or cultural practitioners in Turkey. From participants' responses, analyzed within Berry's theoretical framework, it can be inferred that the success of IC between the two countries requires interactive engagement in which both sides participate actively and effectively. Long-term cultural policies of both nations should aim to reinforce the integration pattern while reducing tendencies toward assimilation and marginalization.

6. Conclusion

In the era of cultural globalization, emphasizing IC as a fundamental element of convergence, understanding, and empathy among nations is particularly significant. A review of the perspectives of university professors and cultural experts identified four levels of cultural communication between Afghanistan and Turkey. At the first level, the researcher recognized the main components of cultural communication between the two nations. At the second level, the scientific challenges associated with this communication were specified. At the third level, opportunities to strengthen and consolidate cultural relations were highlighted. Finally, at the fourth level, the researcher provided a vision for IC between Afghanistan and Turkey.

The present study demonstrates the multilayered nature of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey over the past two decades. First, education and scholarship programs emerged as a key factor in this research. The exchange of Afghan students to Turkey and their subsequent return, equipped with knowledge of the country's culture, language, and socio-political structure, has created a direct and sustainable cultural bridge between the two nations. Afghan graduates, particularly those familiar with Turkey's educational and cultural systems, act as cultural intermediaries and network builders between the two countries, owing to their linguistic skills and social and political understanding (Sey & Seufert, 2016). Second, the translation and publication of literary and cultural works between Persian and Turkish have served as a powerful and long-term tool for fostering IC. Third, Turkish films and television series have played a significant role in Turkey's cultural influence on Afghanistan. These media portray the culture, lifestyle,

social behaviors, clothing, and even consumption patterns of Turkish society, significantly impacting Afghan society and facilitating a process of "cultural institutionalization". This finding aligns with a previous study in cultural and media diplomacy, which indicates that media products are a powerful tool for shaping cultural attitudes and values. Fourth, the establishment of Afghan-Turkish schools indicates that the Turkish government has combined education, culture, and market influence to strengthen its cultural presence. These initiatives, particularly among the younger generation, have promoted direct familiarity with the Turkish language, literature, and culture, functioning as a long-term strategy for fostering IC.

Despite these achievements, the main challenge identified in IC is its one-sided nature. The study revealed that Afghanistan's efforts to introduce its values and culture in Turkey have been limited. This imbalance has reduced mutual influence and hindered cultural convergence. To achieve reciprocal and balanced communication, Afghanistan must also actively participate in introducing its culture and values to Turkey through cultural programs, exhibitions, publications, and diplomatic activities.

Ultimately, future opportunities include organizing joint cultural programs, scientific and cultural conferences, collaborative sports competitions, expanding student exchanges, and creating spaces for bilateral cultural interaction. These initiatives can strengthen cultural convergence, foster empathy among nations, enhance mutual understanding, and help establish a sustainable, balanced cultural connection between Afghanistan and Turkey. The research findings clearly indicate that the provision of scholarships and the production and distribution of Turkish cultural products in Afghan cities are among the most important functions of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey. While the participants in this study offer a clear vision of the relationship between the two countries and consider its outcomes to be the consolidation of relations, the development of empathy, and cultural convergence between Afghans and Turks, they also acknowledge serious challenges in cultural communication between the two nations.

The study demonstrates that one-sided communication between the two countries—specifically, Afghanistan's limited efforts to promote, strengthen, and institutionalize Afghan values in Turkey—and the vertical (top-down) nature of interactions are among the fundamental challenges of IC between Afghanistan and Turkey. Nevertheless, the present research faced certain limitations, including the non-response rate of approximately 40% of participants to whom the questionnaire was sent; that is, out of 20 individuals, 12 responded. The second issue is that Afghanistan lacks a standardized, comprehensive scientific information database, and during this research, I encountered limitations in available resources. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that, in IC, the Afghan side should adopt a strategic communication approach, as a significant result of this research was the one-sided nature of communication from Afghanistan. Cultural and educational exchanges between Afghanistan and Turkey are among the study's other recommendations. Briefly, this research highlights one positive outcome of IC between the two countries: scholarships and Afghan-Turkish schools have been the most significant areas of Afghan-Turkish convergence.

Disclosure statement

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International Audience Perceptions of AI English News Anchors in Promoting Chinese Local Culture: A Q Methodological Study

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Abstract

This study explores how international audiences perceive AI-generated English-speaking news anchors deployed to promote Chinese local culture. Framed within the Human-Machine Communication (HMC) paradigm and enriched by ritual communication theory, the research assesses the role of AI anchors in cultural mediation. Using Q methodology with a diverse sample of 20 participants, the analysis revealed three distinct attitudinal clusters: AI skeptics, collaboration realists, and cost-effectiveness prioritizers. While participants acknowledged AI's technical advantages—such as consistent pronunciation and precise articulation—they expressed hesitation about forming emotional or parasocial bonds with these synthetic presenters. Notably, concerns emerged about AI's ability to sustain the symbolic and affective rituals essential to meaningful cross-cultural communication. Collaboration realists advocated for hybrid human–AI approaches, whereas cost-effectiveness prioritizers emphasized AI's operational efficiencies. Collectively, the findings highlight that deploying AI in cross-cultural settings involves more than technological capability—it actively reconfigures the nature of communicative agency.

Keywords

AI news anchors, cross-cultural communication, audience perceptions, human-machine communication, Q methodology, ritual view of communication

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1. Introduction

Social Artificial Intelligence (Social AI) is transforming how news is produced, delivered, and interpreted (Lewis et al., 2019; Moran & Shaikh, 2022). A salient manifestation is the AI news anchor—virtual presenters designed to emulate human anchors. This transformation is visible globally, with AI anchors emerging in South Korea, Kuwait, and Indonesia (Nur Fitria, 2024). More recently, in China, the city of Weifang in Shandong Province launched "Douglas", a Western-looking AI anchor to promote local culture to international audiences (ChinaDaily, 2024; Weifang Radio & Television Station, 2024). Deployed on social media platforms like X, Douglas exemplifies how local cultural storytelling now travels through global digital infrastructures.

The spread of AI anchors raises ethical and practical concerns, as journalism requires accountability, transparency, and human oversight (Morosoli et al., 2025). It must avoid "technochauvinism", which overvalues technical solutions at the expense of human judgment (Broussard et al., 2019, p. 674). These concerns are heightened in cross-cultural communication, where authenticity and emotional resonance are essential (Midtgarden, 2021; Salihoğlu, 2025).

Given that journalism remains "a human endeavor", AI is best understood as augmenting, not replacing, journalistic practice (Diakopoulos, 2019, p. 39). However, as AI news anchors increasingly enter intercultural communication settings, audiences' perceptions of their roles and effectiveness remain unclear. Guided by the Human-Machine Communication agenda (Guzman & Lewis, 2020) and the ritual view of communication (Carey, 2009), we examine how international audiences perceive Douglas in the context of Chinese local cultural promotion. Through this case study, we aim to understand the implications of AI-mediated communication for the negotiation of cultural meaning and human–machine relations. Our objectives are operationalized through Q methodology to capture audience subjectivities, supplemented by insider perspectives from an interview with a human anchor at the Weifang Radio & Television Station. This approach offers a nuanced account of audience subjectivities in an increasingly interconnected, AI-mediated media environment. In this vein, the following research questions are posited:

1) How do international audiences perceive AI English news anchors in promoting Chinese local culture?

2) What subjective viewpoints emerge regarding the role of AI technologies in cross-cultural communication?

To complement the audience perspectives, insights from a professional human anchor interview are incorporated to contextualize audience perceptions, offering a fuller understanding of the AI-mediated cultural communication.

2. Review of literature

2.1. AI and journalism

AI is increasingly embedded in journalism, reshaping how news is produced and consumed. This shift demands reconsiderations of frameworks for transparency, accountability, and professional identity (Diakopoulos, 2019). On the production side, AI supports automated writing, data-driven reporting, and personalized distribution (Ndlovu, 2024; Stenbom et al., 2023), boosting efficiency but raising concerns about intellectual property, transparency, and journalists' roles (Mehmood, 2025). On the consumption side, audiences encounter AI through algorithmic feeds on synthetic platforms often controlled by monopolistic actors, prompting debates about the information cocoon and human values in an AI-mediated public sphere (Shi & Sun, 2024).

Within this transformation, AI news anchors have become a prominent application. In 2018, Xinhua News Agency, China's state-run news agency, launched the world's first AI news anchor in collaboration with Sogou, a Chinese search engine company (Kuo, 2018). By applying machine learning technologies, this AI anchor delivers news in both Chinese and English with accuracy and efficiency that rival those of human counterparts (Tao, 2018). Several months later, the same institution introduced the world's first female AI anchor modeled on one of its human anchors (Houser, 2019). This innovation has sparked global interest, with countries including South Korea, Kuwait, and Indonesia developing their own versions (Nur Fitria, 2024). Built with natural language processing (NLP), computer vision, and synthetic media tools, AI anchors can "substitute or supplement human anchors" (Huang & Yu, 2023, p. 438), delivering news continuously and in multiple languages (Bohacek & Farid, 2024). Benefits claimed for them include efficiency, cost savings, continuous operation, precise delivery, and multilingual reach (Nur Fitria, 2024).

However, significant challenges persist: credibility, limited creativity, weak emotional connection, and the potential marginalization of human professionals (Bohacek & Farid, 2024; Xue et al., 2022). These tensions spotlight the difficulty of preserving meaningful human connection in highly mediated environments (Pauly, 2014) and raise broader questions about how communicative labor and journalistic authority are being redefined in AI-driven news ecosystems.

2.2. AI news anchors and audience perceptions

Audience perception shapes how emerging media technologies are adopted, adapted, or resisted (Morosoli et al., 2025). As AI anchors are increasingly developed and deployed, researchers have begun investigating audience responses to this advancement. Huang and Yu (2023) conducted a questionnaire-based study using video stimuli, applying Expectation Confirmation Theory and partial least squares structural equation modeling. They demonstrated that neither novelty nor anthropomorphism predicted sustained engagement with AI anchors, but that perceived credibility, trust, satisfaction, and intelligence did.

Extending this inquiry, Liu et al. (2024) employed a 2 × 2 × 2 online experimental design to examine the effects of anchor type (AI vs. human), news topic (livelihood vs. politics), and platform nature (official vs. we-media). Their findings show that AI anchors were consistently evaluated as less reliable, indicating that audiences primarily attribute communicative authority to human presenters. Xue et al. (2022) used an experimental manipulation of appearance and voice attributes, finding that non-humanoid female anchors with anthropomorphic voices elicited higher willingness to watch. Additionally, mediation analysis in Xue et al.'s (2022) study revealed that perceived attractiveness and pre-existing impressions of news authority shaped audience reactions.

Complementing these quantitative findings, Ndlovu (2024) employed digital ethnography and interviews to explore audience responses to AI anchors in Zimbabwe, revealing a nuanced balance between appreciation for technological innovation and concerns about emotional engagement, voice authenticity, and labor displacement.

Importantly, these studies highlight the tensions between technical application and audience expectations. Su (2020) argues that televisual authority derives not simply from accurate transmission of information, but from emotional storytelling and cultural resonance. This suggests that acceptance of AI news anchors depends more on their symbolic and affective functions than on their informational efficiency. This insight becomes especially salient in cross-cultural contexts, where authenticity, representation, and resonance are paramount and where technological mediation shapes cultural boundaries and identities (Livingston & Bahador, 2025).

However, germane discussions remain scarce, especially empirical ones. Most existing research is national in scope. Little examines how international audiences perceive AI anchors in cross-cultural communication. Prior studies also lean on quantitative measures of surface attributes (such as appearance and voice) that miss deeper interpretive processes. Such methods often lack sensitivity to subjective experience and cultural nuance (Leeman & Novak, 2017), and are thereby unable to fathom the audience's expectations and watching effects.

2.3. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: the Human-Machine Communication (HMC) research agenda (Guzman & Lewis, 2020) and the ritual view of communication (Carey, 2009). Guzman and Lewis's (2020) HMC research agenda provides a crucial framework for understanding how emerging media technologies reshape communication. It systematically examines how technological and human elements interact to create new forms of communication and meaning-making.

The HMC framework comprises three dimensions: functional, relational, and metaphysical. The functional dimension focuses on the design and perception of AI as communicative agents, enabling analysis of how AI anchors' verbal and non-verbal strategies influence international audiences'

evaluations of cultural information delivery. The relational dimension examines reciprocal understanding between humans and AI, exploring how audiences perceive AI anchors. The metaphysical dimension addresses the evolving boundaries between humans and technology, assessing how AI anchors impact audiences' understanding of cultural communication while raising ethical, legal, and societal questions. As Stenbom et al. (2023) note, the HMC framework helps researchers explore how machines function and how people interpret and respond to them, a key focus in a media environment where human–machine boundaries are increasingly blurred.

While robust for human–machine interaction, the HMC framework less effectively addresses cross-cultural effects, especially the political and cultural positioning of foreign-looking AI anchors in China. In China's international communication strategies, AI anchors extend this effort by enabling consistent, multilingual messaging (e.g., through English-speaking news anchors), adapting to diverse viewer expectations, and amplifying narrative reach across platforms. According to Weifang Radio & Television Station (2024), deploying an AI English news anchor aligns with China's broader goal of "telling good Chinese stories" internationally. Beyond audience perceptions, it is crucial to analyze how AI anchors shape views of Chinese culture and influence global news consumption habits.

To complement the HMC framework, this study draws on the ritual view of communication (Carey, 2009) to analyze how international audiences receive Chinese cultural information mediated by AI anchors. From the ritual perspective, communication is not merely the transmission of information but a symbolic process linked to concepts such as "sharing," "participation," "association," "fellowship," and "the possession of a common faith" (Carey, 2009, p. 15), through which cultural meanings and identities are continually reproduced. Whereas the transmission view of communication emphasizes the transfer of information from sender to receiver, the ritual view emphasizes how communicative acts function to maintain cultural cohesion and reaffirm collective values across time (Carey, 2009; Peters, 2019). Building on this perspective, Midtgarden (2021) highlights the ritual view's importance for examining how communication technologies shape both instrumental delivery of information and the symbolic enactment of cultural meaning and human interaction in complex cross-cultural contexts.

In AI-driven media settings, the ritual view is especially relevant. AI news anchors are not merely disseminators of information; they participate in the ritualized performance of culture, identity, and authority that was once undertaken solely by human beings. As Sen (2017) notes, emerging media technologies actively reconfigure the social fabric and interpretive framework through which audiences negotiate meanings. Accordingly, this study draws on the ritual view in the discussion section to assess the AI anchor's role in fulfilling the symbolic and affective dimensions of cultural communication, such as cultivating emotional resonance and reinforcing shared values. In the specific context of this study, where the AI anchor is tasked with promoting Weifang's local culture to international audiences, the ritual view enables a deeper examination of how cultural narratives are performed and how audiences interpret the human–machine boundaries in the symbolic reproduction of culture.

By integrating the ritual view, this study positions AI anchors as mediators of meaning-making between Chinese culture and global audiences. This perspective acknowledges the role of ritual in recognizing technology's potential to both enhance and complicate these connections (Pauly, 2014). It also aligns with Guzman and Lewis's (2020, p. 73) view of AI as both "communicators" and entities "interpreted by people", where shared features with audiences can enhance credibility, empathy, and emotional ties. Together, the HMC agenda and the ritual view offer a systematic framework for analyzing the dynamics between AI anchors, human perceptions, and mediated cultural interactions.

3. Method

Q methodology is a systematic approach for examining individuals' subjective views on a specific topic (Stephenson, 1935, 1953). It combines statistical techniques to identify shared viewpoints with qualitative analysis to interpret and contextualize them (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Participants sort a set of statements along a grid according to their level of agreement or disagreement, enabling researchers to map the attitudes that shape perspectives on socio-technical phenomena (Lundberg et al., 2020; Watts, 2015). To deepen insight into participants' subjectivities, researchers often conduct post-sorting interviews (Li & Tao, 2024; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

This study followed four key steps of Q methodology: (1) developing the statement sample, (2) selecting participants, (3) conducting Q-sorts and post-sorting interviews, and (4) performing factor analysis and factor interpretation. Together, these procedures provide a structured, replicable way to investigate complex subjective viewpoints about emerging technologies in news media, offering "more structure and better replicability" in audience research (Davis & Michelle, 2011, p. 559). In addition to these core steps, this study incorporated a complementary semi-structured interview with a professional human anchor. This interview was not part of the Q-sorting procedure itself. However, it was introduced to contextualize factor interpretations and to provide practitioners with insights into the institutional logic underpinning AI anchor deployment.

3.1. Developing sample statements (Q-sets)

Sample statements (Q-sets) are carefully selected, unbiased items drawn from a concourse, defined as a comprehensive pool of statements about the research topic (Watts & Stenner, 2012, 2005). To build a robust concourse representing diverse perspectives on AI news anchors in cross-cultural communication, we collected materials from 40 peer-reviewed articles, five government policy documents, five industry reports, and 20 pieces of news coverage and online discussions published between 2018 and 2025. This breadth ensured inclusion of both formal and informal viewpoints on attitudes, perceptions, and responses to AI news anchors, particularly in cross-cultural communication and about cultural representation.

We generated an initial pool of 50 statements through thematic analysis of the concourse, focusing on how different stakeholders frame AI in cultural communication. Since Q-sets must align with the research aims (Watts & Stenner, 2012), we independently reviewed the statements, merged redundancies, and

refined wording through multiple rounds of discussion. An external expert in Q methodology and AI communication reviewed the Q-set for clarity, dimensional balance, and potential bias, ensuring it captured the complexity of human–machine communication in cross-cultural contexts.

To guarantee representativeness and clarity across diverse cultural backgrounds, we conducted a pilot test with two participants from the target population. They assessed each statement's clarity, neutrality, and interpretability. Based on their feedback, we made minor revisions to improve linguistic precision and reduce ambiguity. The pilot participants did not take part in the main Q-sorting phase. After iterative refinement, the final Q-set comprised 34 statements, evenly distributed across the functional, relational, and metaphysical dimensions of the HMC framework (see Appendix 1).

3.2. Selecting participants (P-set)

Q methodology emphasizes strategic participant selection over large samples, which can be "problematic" (Watts & Stenner, 2005, p. 79). Participants are chosen for their ability to provide "interesting, informative, and relevant viewpoints" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 71). We used purposive sampling to recruit 20 participants (P1-P20) from diverse nationalities to capture a wide range of cultural perspectives on AI-mediated communication (see Table 1), keeping the P-set smaller than the Q-set, as recommended by Watts and Stenner (2012). Participant selection targeted international users of global media platforms to elicit varied perceptions of AI English news anchors and their engagement with Chinese cultural content. Inclusion criteria were: (1) non-Chinese nationality; (2) user of international social media platforms (e.g., X) where AI-anchored videos circulate; and (3) at least moderate familiarity with AI and news media. We prioritized diversity in national and educational backgrounds to broaden perspectives rather than enable cross-national comparisons.

The sample included 11 males and nine females, with an average age of nearly 23 (M = 23.45, SD = 7.30), from Asia, Europe, and Africa. Academic backgrounds spanned STEM (n = 9) and social sciences/humanities (n = 11). Education levels ranged from undergraduate (n = 13) to postgraduate (n = 5; 2 master's students, 3 PhD students) and PhD holders (n = 2; one postdoctoral researcher, one assistant professor). Participants reported moderate familiarity with AI news anchors (M = 3.15, SD = 0.99 on a 5-point scale). All participants used English as their working language.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Characteristics	***n* (%)**
Gender	
Male	11 (55%)
Female	9 (45%)
Region	
Asia	13 (65%)
Europe	5 (25%)
Africa	2 (10%)

Academic Discipline	
STEM	9 (45%)
Social Sciences/Humanities	11 (55%)
Education Level	
Undergraduate	13 (65%)
Master's	2 (10%)
PhD Students/PhD	5 (25%)
	***M* (*SD*)**
Age (years)	23.45 (7.30)
Familiarity with AI News Anchors (1-5)	3.15 (0.99)

Note. SD = Standard Deviation

3.3. Conducting the Q-sorting and post-sorting interviews

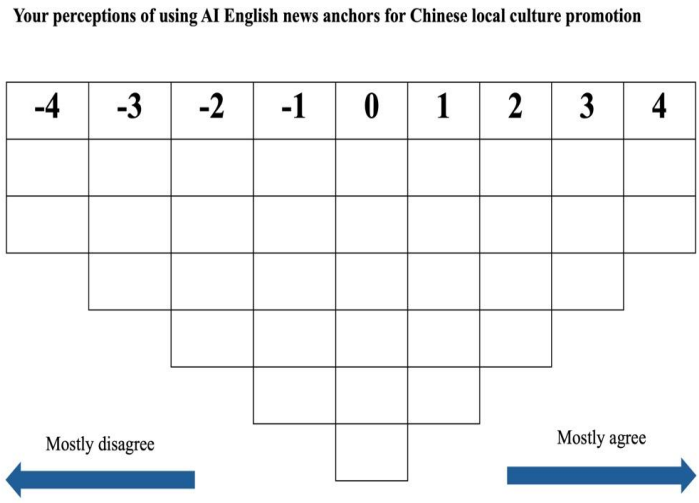
Q-sorting is the process by which participants rank the Q-set based on their subjective viewpoints. For this study, Q-sorting was conducted on Q-TIP,[1] An online platform designed specifically for Q methodology. This web-based tool allowed participants to access 34 statement cards via a unique URL. Ethical approval was obtained from a university ethics committee before the study; informed consent was collected from all participants; and all identifiable information was removed to ensure anonymity.

The Q-sorting process comprised four stages. First, participants were briefed on the study's ethical guidelines, background, and purpose. Second, they watched two three-to-four-minute videos of Douglas, the AI English news anchor, presenting content on Chinese local culture. Both videos focused on Weifang's local culture (night market and Mid-Autumn Festival customs), reflecting the anchor's government-designated mission to promote local cultural identity internationally. The videos were randomly selected from the government's X account to ensure an authentic representation of cultural themes. All participants viewed the same videos to maintain comparability and shared understanding. The viewing sessions were conducted in a quiet room to minimize distractions. For participants unable to attend in person, the sessions were held via Zoom under identical conditions. During the viewing, participants were encouraged to raise questions and share brief reflections to facilitate comprehension before proceeding to the Q-sorting. Third, participants sorted the 34 statement cards using a forced distribution grid, with -4 indicating strong disagreement, 4 indicating strong agreement, and 0 representing neutrality (see Figure 1). Finally, post-sorting interviews were conducted and recorded to understand participants' reasoning behind their rankings. These structured interviews explored participants' interpretations of their Q-sort results, as well as their experiences with AI technologies, media consumption habits, and cultural backgrounds that influence their perceptions. This qualitative component provided essential context for interpreting the factor arrays, offering more profound insights into how individual beliefs and experiences shaped participants' viewpoints. Ultimately, 20 complete sorts and interviews were collected for analysis.

[1]. https://qtip.geography.wisc.edu

To complement the audience data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with a Chinese-speaking news anchor from Weifang's local television station (referred to as Anchor Z, per the interviewee's request and ethical guidelines). The rationale for this interview was to situate audience perceptions within the industry context and to provide an insider view of the professional, ethical, and communicative logics underlying the AI anchor's deployment. The interview was explicitly structured following the HMC framework's three dimensions to ensure theoretical consistency with the development of the Q statements and the subsequent discussion of the results. While guided by this framework, the interview also allowed the anchor flexibility to share personal experiences and professional perspectives. The interview focused on the perceived strengths and limitations of AI anchors, their interaction with human anchors, the ontological and ethical implications of AI-mediated cultural communication, and regulatory considerations surrounding their deployment. Rather than constituting a separate line of inquiry, the practitioner insights were incorporated into the discussion to contextualize and facilitate the interpretation of audience viewpoints.

Figure 1. Forced distribution grid



3.4. Factor analysis and interpretation

The 20 sorts were entered into the Ken-Q Analysis Desktop Edition (KADE) program (Banasick, 2019) for by-person factor analysis. Factor extraction followed two criteria: (1) eigenvalues greater than one, and (2) at least two significant loadings (Watts & Stenner, 2012). After testing multiple solutions, a three-factor Brown centroid solution with varimax rotation was selected, explaining 42% of the cumulative variance.

In Q methodology, each factor represents a shared viewpoint, reconstructed through factor arrays produced by the analysis. These arrays consist of standardized Z-scores and corresponding Q-sort values

for each statement. The Z-score reflects the statistical strength and direction of participants' agreement or disagreement with a given statement within a factor. At the same time, the Q-sort value indicates its relative position on the Q distribution grid (ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement). Statements with the highest positive Z-scores and Q-sort values are interpreted as those most strongly endorsed by participants associated with a factor. In contrast, statements with the most negative Z-scores reveal points of most vigorous disagreement. These distinguishing statements form the basis for interpreting each factor as a coherent communicative perspective (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Post-sorting interviews and the interview with Anchor Z were transcribed verbatim and analyzed following the idea of qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Rather than employing formal coding schemes, two authors read the transcripts multiple times and then systematically focused on and extracted key terms, recurring themes, and meaning expressions that illuminate participants' subjective reasoning and complemented the Q-sorting results.

4. Results

Through data analysis, three factors emerged, with their characteristics summarized in Table 2. Factor 1 shows the highest composite reliability (0.973) and contains nine defining variables, accounting for 24% of explained variance. Factors 2 and 3 show strong composite reliability values (0.960 and 0.941, respectively), with Factor 2 involving six defining variables (10% of explained variance) and Factor 3 containing four (8% of explained variance). In the following, excerpts from post-sorting interviews are integrated to clarify participants' reasoning and supplement the interpretation of each factor.

Table 2. Factor characteristics

Factors	F1	F2	F3
Number of defining variables	9	6	4
Average reliability coefficient	0.800	0.800	0.800
Composite reliability	0.973	0.960	0.941
S.E. of factor Z-scores	0.164	0.200	0.243
Eigenvalues	4.7779	2.0324	1.5697
% explained variance	24	10	8
Cumulative % explained variance	24	34	42

4.1. Factor 1: AI English news anchor skeptics

Factor 1, with the highest composite reliability and the most extensive set of defining variables, is the most prominent and dependable. It represents individuals who are skeptical of AI English news anchors' ability to effectively promote Chinese local culture. Participants express significant doubts about AI's

capacity to deliver authentic cultural communication, questioning whether technology can replicate human understanding, empathy, and nuance across cultures (see Table 3).

Key distinguishing statements highlight concerns about AI's impact on journalism careers (Q3), lack of interactivity (Q6), limited cultural understanding (Q12), and absence of empathy (Q25). During post-sorting interviews, participants elaborated on these concerns. For instance, P2 observed: "[AI anchors] will just follow instructions … and they cannot express emotions to the audience." Despite concerns, participants acknowledge AI's inevitable integration and see potential for AI-human collaboration (Q10), as P10 suggested: "Humans can deliver the news sensibly while being accompanied by AI news anchors [who are] more accurate in information."

Participants' disagreement with statements about emotional connection (Q14), natural body language (Q18), and eagerness to continue viewing AI anchors (Q13) underscores their belief that AI cannot build emotional bonds or sustain interest in Chinese culture. As P2 remarked: "[AI news anchor]'s facial emotion is always the same;" P3 described the anchor's body language as "stiff," pointing to technical shortcomings. Concerns about data privacy (Q9), AI's ability to engage broader audiences (Q15), and overly human-like appearances (Q7) further reflect unease about technological deception and authenticity.

Overall, Factor 1 captures deep concerns about human expertise and emotional intelligence in cultural communication. While participants anticipate inevitable AI-human collaboration, their cautious stance reflects a strong preference for human anchors in conveying cultural content.

Table 3. Distinguishing statements for Factor 1

No.	Statements	Z-score	Q sort value
3	I think the rise of AI English news anchors will influence whether people choose to pursue careers in journalism.	1.59	4
6	I feel that AI English news anchors are not interactive.	1.34	3
12	I feel that AI English news anchors lack cultural understanding in international news broadcasting.	1.03	2
25	I feel that AI English news anchors lack empathy.	1.01	2
10	I anticipate seeing collaborations between AI English news anchors and human anchors.	0.29	1
15	AI English news anchors can reach a wider audience.	-0.07	0
27	I believe AI English news anchors lack the ability for in-depth analysis.	-0.08	0
7	I would feel uncomfortable with AI English news anchors that are too close to human anchors.	-0.11	0
21	I believe the emergence of AI English news anchors will require us to re-examine existing ethical norms and laws.	-0.26	-1
28	After watching programs featuring AI English news anchors, I will develop an interest in experiencing Chinese local culture.	-0.39	-1

9	The use of AI English news anchors may pose threats to data privacy and security.	-1.13	-2
13	I will continue to watch programs where AI English news anchors promote Chinese local culture.	-1.24	-3
18	I find the body language of AI English news anchors to be natural and vivid.	-1.63	-3
14	I can develop an emotional connection with AI English news anchors.	-1.95	-4

4.2. Factor 2: Collaboration realists

Factor 2 captures a pragmatic stance toward AI English news anchors, which favors AI–human collaboration while calling for a reassessment of ethical norms and regulations. This group expresses cautious optimism, acknowledging AI's potential while recognizing its limitations in promoting Chinese local culture (see Table 4).

Participants exhibit a balanced understanding of AI's benefits and challenges in cultural communication. They support AI–human collaboration (Q10) and are open to watching AI-anchored programs with others (Q4). Additionally, Q21 underscores the importance of updated norms and regulations to ensure ethical and responsible AI use, particularly given AI anchors' lack of in-depth analysis (Q27). As P5 stated: "I'm looking forward to seeing the collaboration since I trust the human anchor more." P18 emphasized: "We need human collaboration with AI English news anchors to make sure the content is authentic and does not disseminate fake news … we need new ethical norms and laws to supervise AI-generated English news," reflecting thoughtful perspectives on governance and quality control.

The lowest-ranked statements reveal concerns about content accuracy and reliability (Q5), content–image coherence (Q31), and timeliness in AI-anchored news delivery (Q26). Participants strongly reject the notion that AI will replace humans in broadcasting (Q1), particularly in programs promoting culture.

Factor 2 reflects a moderate, collaborative outlook. It recognizes the potential of AI–human collaboration but insists on addressing ethical challenges and AI's limitations through clear regulatory frameworks. In contrast to Factor 1's skepticism, Factor 2 anticipates benefits from AI while maintaining human oversight and strong ethical safeguards. As "collaborative realists," these participants aim to balance innovation with responsibility to protect the reliability and authenticity of cultural content.

Table 4. Distinguishing statements for Factor 2

No.	Q Statements	Z-score	Q sort value
10	I anticipate seeing collaborations between AI English news anchors and human anchors.	1.87	4
21	I believe the emergence of AI English news anchors will require us to re-examine existing ethical norms and laws.	1.44	3

4	I will watch programs featuring AI English news anchors together with others.	0.83	2
27	I believe AI English news anchors lack the ability for in-depth analysis.	0.70	2
13	I will continue to watch programs where AI English news anchors promote Chinese local culture.	0.27	1
25	I feel that AI English news anchors lack empathy.	0.19	0
20	AI English news anchors maintain a high level of accuracy and avoid slips of the tongue.	-0.12	0
26	AI English news anchors can deliver news more timely than human anchors.	-0.88	-2
31	I find that the content delivered by AI English news anchors is coherent with the pictures in the videos.	-1.10	-2
5	I trust that the information about Chinese local culture presented by AI English news anchors is reliable and accurate.	-1.17	-3
1	I believe AI English news anchors will replace human ones.	-1.29	-3

4.3. Factor 3: Cost-effectiveness prioritizes

Factor 3 reflects a utilitarian perspective that prioritizes the economic and operational efficiency of using AI English news anchors to promote Chinese local culture (Q29). Participants highlighted cost and productivity benefits: “using AI English news anchors, you do not need to hire foreigners to broadcast the news, and it would save more time” (P13), and described AI anchors as “a 24/7 agent requiring no sleep for news broadcasting” (P14) that “can be programmed to meet different needs” (P1). They also noted that the gender (Q16) and appearance (Q24) of AI anchors can shape audience acceptance, indicating sensitivity to design factors. To enable broader adoption, they emphasized updating ethical guidelines (Q21) and revising training and educational approaches for human anchors (Q33).

However, participants were reluctant to share their viewing experiences with others (Q32), noting that “there is nothing to talk about other than the fact that the technology has progressed” (P14). This indicates they see AI anchors as functional tools rather than engaging communicators. They also opposed AI–human collaboration in broadcasting Chinese local culture (Q10), favoring programs delivered solely by human anchors because “they have unique personalities and [a] unique way of storytelling, making us feel more connected” (P14). This preference is reinforced by their lack of enjoyment when watching AI-anchored programs (Q34) and their slight unwillingness to continue viewing such content (Q13). For these participants, efficiency gains do not outweigh the absence of emotional connection and viewer engagement. Their disinterest stems from perceived shortcomings of AI anchors, including a lack of empathy (Q25), potential bias (Q30), and limited capacity for in-depth analysis (Q27). These concerns are shared across all factors. Despite recognizing economic benefits, these limitations reduce their interest in both AI–human collaborative programming and AI-anchored content overall.

Factor 3 represents cost-effectiveness prioritizers who value the resource and operational advantages of AI English news anchors but acknowledge limitations that impede viewer engagement and effective cultural communication. They call for updated ethical, legal, and educational frameworks to address these challenges and maximize the technology's potential.

Table 5. Distinguishing statements for Factor 3

No	Q Statements	Z-score	Q sort value
29	Compared to human anchors, using AI English news anchors to promote Chinese local culture and build the city's image is more cost-effective.	1.86	4
16	The gender (male or female) of AI English news anchors impacts my acceptance of the information they present.	0.60	1
24	The appearance of AI English news anchors (such as facial features, hairstyle, and attire) influences my acceptance of the information they present.	0.43	1
21	I believe the emergence of AI English news anchors will require us to re-examine existing ethical norms and laws.	0.41	1
33	I think the rise of AI English news anchors will influence how human anchors are trained.	0.36	1
17	I think AI English news anchors lack a unique personality.	-0.01	0
2	I find the Chinese cultural content presented by AI English news anchors to be rich and diverse.	-0.21	-1
13	I will continue to watch programs where AI English news anchors promote Chinese local culture.	-0.62	-1
27	I believe AI English news anchors lack the ability for in-depth analysis.	-0.82	-2
30	I believe AI English news anchors are unbiased when introducing Chinese local culture.	-1.03	-2
25	I feel that AI English news anchors lack empathy.	-1.06	-2
34	I enjoy watching the programs of Chinese local culture delivered by AI English news anchors.	-1.26	-3
10	I anticipate seeing collaborations between AI English news anchors and human anchors.	-1.63	-4
32	I will share my experience watching programs featuring AI English news anchors with others.	-1.96	-4

4.4. Consensus statements among three factors

In addition to distinguishing statements, the analysis also identified consensus statements, which show no significant differences in Z-scores across the three factors (Watts & Stenner, 2012). These statements represent areas of shared agreement or common concern among all participants and help reveal underlying assumptions or widely accepted views about AI news anchors in cross-cultural communication

4.4.1. AI news anchors' technical competencies

All three factors agree that AI anchors exhibit standard pronunciation and clear articulation (Q8) and that voice characteristics influence information acceptance (Q11). This reflects a shared recognition of AI's technical strengths and the importance of communicative quality in cross-cultural contexts. Participants noted that pronunciation, tone, and intonation significantly affect audiences' acceptance of both information and Chinese local culture. They affirmed that AI anchors excel in standard, clear pronunciation, representing a notable technological achievement. As P6 put it, "It is objectively true since they are trained on language models." However, participants evaluated Q11 negatively. They argued that while technical quality is high, emotional and expressive qualities remain lacking. As P1 observed: "AI news anchors are very monotone and don't have quite the character, [and] don't have quite the intonation … it keeps off a lack of interest for us [and] leads [to] less desire to watch the news."

4.4.2. Audiences' reluctance to form parasocial relationships with AI news anchors

Consensus disagreement with becoming a fan of an AI English news anchor (Q19) highlights audiences' reluctance to form parasocial relationships with AI anchors. A parasocial relationship refers to a perceived interpersonal relationship or emotional bond that audiences form with media figures (Qi et al., 2025). This reluctance underscores technology's inability to foster authentic human connections across segments. The reasons differ by factor. Factor 1 expresses skepticism about authenticity: "It is a bizarre concept. It is not the real thing" (P8). Factor 2 prefers human anchors and maintains that emotional bonds with AI are impossible: "It is impossible to have an emotional connection with AI anchors" (P15). Factor 3 adopts a utilitarian view, seeing AI anchors as functional, efficiency-driven tools rather than relationship builders. Despite these distinct rationales, the consistent disagreement across all factors points to the same conclusion: AI anchors lack the human qualities necessary to enable parasocial relationships.

5. Discussion

This study identifies three factors shaping international audiences' perceptions of AI English news anchors in promoting Chinese local culture: skeptics (Factor 1), collaborative realists (Factor 2), and cost-effectiveness prioritizes (Factor 3). Drawing on the HMC research agenda (Guzman & Lewis, 2020), we assess AI news anchors as international communicators across three dimensions: functional, relational, and metaphysical. In parallel, using the ritual view of communication (Carey, 2009), we explore how audiences may understand Chinese local culture as a ritual mechanism that can shape individual worldviews and social realities (Sen, 2017).

Factors 1 and 2 emphasize the relational and metaphysical dimensions, focusing on the viewer–anchor relationship and the broader philosophical implications of AI in cultural communication. Factor 3 spans all three dimensions, showing the highest positive Z-score on the functional dimension and the lowest negative Z-score on the relational dimension. This pattern indicates that Factor 3 values AI's practical

utility while remaining cautious about AI–human interaction, reflecting an instrumental view of technology.

5.1. Functional dimension

The functional dimension concerns the design of AI, which serves as the foundation for people's sense-making processes when encountering AI as communicative agents (Guzman & Lewis, 2020). The humanoid functional features of virtual avatars (e.g., appearances, voices, and gestures) enable "making sense of these devices and applications as communicators" (Guzman & Lewis, 2020, p. 81). However, as Natale and Guzman (2022) argue, machine agency "only emerges in interaction and relationship with humans and their cultures" (p. 628), which is constructed through "see[ing] eye to eye with him" and more importantly, "hav[ing] an acceptance of him and of his way of seeing things" (Kelly, 2003, p. 66).

This social interaction is interpreted by Guzman and Lewis (2020, p. 76) as our "conceptualization and evaluation" of communicative parties, which discerns how people understand and evaluate attributes and relationships with other communicators. Various functional aspects collectively shape this conceptualization. Drawing from the ritual view of communication, which posits that communication is not merely information transmission but a participatory process that fosters shared cultural experiences and community bonds (Carey, 2009, pp. 12–18), mere technical clarity is not adequate for audiences' desire to build emotional connections and achieve social maintenance. For example, consensus agreement regarding AI anchors' standard and clear articulation alone could not establish the audience's complete conceptualization of AI anchors as effective communicators. As Midtgarden (2021) argues, effective communication requires both instrumental and consummatory aspects: technical competence must be complemented by meaningful participation in shared cultural experiences.

Factor 1 participants particularly emphasized this concern. The distinguishing statement Q18 (Z-score: -1.63; Q-sort value: -3) reveals that for this group, unnatural, robotic body language significantly undermines how they interpret AI-mediated messages. Such limitations may trigger the uncanny valley effect: when facial expressions, gestures, and movements only imperfectly mimic human behavior, audience acceptance and emotional engagement decline. Research suggests anthropomorphic features, such as body language, vocal tone, and overall personification, have been linked in prior work to both acceptance of and sustained interest in AI anchors (e.g., Huang & Yu, 2023; Xue et al., 2022). This underscores the complex interplay between technical competence and communicative authenticity in ritualized news consumption, where emotionality and social presence are essential for credibility and communal participation (Huang & Yu, 2023).

Unanimous agreement on the importance of AI anchors' voices in shaping international audiences' understanding points to deeper cultural and communicative implications. Although voice-related items fall under the functional dimension, they inevitably involve subjective interpretation, because voice is "commonly understood as an authentic marker of one's unique—inherently *human*—subjectivity" (Levy-Landesberg & Cao, 2025, p. 230, italics in original). Accordingly, features of an anchor's voice are likely

to influence not only news acceptance and consumption but, more importantly, viewers' willingness to engage with the cultural content. As in music and storytelling, voice functions as a conduit for presence, enabling shared enactment of cultural narratives and the emotional bonds that sustain social cohesion over time (e.g., Crooke et al., 2024; Hmala, 2023). In this study, participants across all factors expressed negative impressions of AI anchors' voices. They often characterize them as monotone and flat, thereby impeding parasocial relationship formation and dampening their interest in Chinese local culture.

These reactions may also reflect the complexities of cross-cultural mediation. AI anchors must navigate not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural and emotional nuance, capacities that may exceed current technological limits (Yang et al., 2024). When communicating Chinese local culture to international audiences, AI anchors mediate between local and target cultures through their programmed voices. Yet voice "create[s] and convey[s] that presence in and as the world," serving as a marker of agency (Derrida, 2016, p. xiii). Programmed voices, even when "consciously shared and augmented" from human sources (Levy-Landesberg & Cao, 2025, p. 246), struggle to create that sense of presence. As a result, what appears to be a functional attribute—voice—ultimately shapes how people perceive their relationships with virtual entities and prompts reflection on the fundamental social functions of voice.

5.2. Relational dimension

The relational dimension concerns how people "associate with these technologies and, in turn, relate to themselves and others" (Guzman & Lewis, 2020, p. 81). It becomes especially complex in cross-cultural contexts, where relationship-building is essential for effective cultural transmission. The complexity is heightened in multicultural societies, where issues of conceptual equivalence and applicability of measurement are critical to meaningful communication (Duh & Chen, 2007). In our case, the AI English news anchor was deliberately designed as a foreign-looking American presenter with standard English pronunciation to reduce perceived distance and improve message delivery to international audiences (Anchor Z, 2 December 2024). However, participants' responses suggest that this virtual avatar does not serve as an effective human anchor proficient in cross-cultural communication, failing to bridge cultural gaps and facilitate understanding as intended.

From the ritual perspective, much of the content delivered by AI anchors, including introductions to local festivals, major events, and cultural initiatives, is intended to perform and renew shared meanings for international audiences, thereby sustaining cultural understanding over time (Sumiala, 2012). Yet the AI anchor's inability to generate affective resonance or cultivate authentic emotional bonds disrupts this ritual dimension of communication. Participants did not merely dismiss AI anchors as technical tools; they expressed concern that these virtual figures may struggle to enact and sustain the symbolic rituals that undergird cultural identity and belonging (Peters, 2019).

Participants also reported that they cannot form emotional connections with virtual anchors. Emotion is crucial for communication, yet machines may lack this essential capacity (Guzman, 2020). In culture-focused news, the difficulties participants experienced in building social and emotional ties with virtual

anchors weakened communicative impact. This challenge echoes the "moral crumple zone" in AI systems, where responsibility and authentic human connection are disproportionately concentrated while algorithmic mediation limits genuine cultural exchange (Elish, 2019). From the ritual view, culture is not merely transmitted but performed through patterned, affectively resonant practices (Peters, 2019; Sumiala, 2012). The absence of affective connection, therefore, demands careful consideration when using AI anchors to promote local culture internationally, given that culture is inherently relational and encompasses "a wide range of phenomena including norms, values, shared meanings, and patterned ways of behaving" (Birukou et al., 2013, p. 3).

Notably, Factors 2 and 3 diverge sharply in their views on AI–human collaboration in anchoring (Q10). Factor 2 strongly favors collaboration (Z-score: 1.87; Q-sort value: 4), whereas Factor 3 strongly opposes it (Z-score: -1.63; Q-sort value: -4). This contrast reveals different conceptions of AI's communicative role. Factor 3 views AI anchors primarily as cost-saving tools for cross-cultural communication, a stance reflected in their reluctance to watch or share AI-anchored videos. In contrast, Factor 2 supports collaboration based on recognizing complementary strengths and limitations, including concerns about AI-driven misinformation. These perspectives illustrate how "people's interpretations of the nature of a communicator" shape "their judgments" (Guzman, 2020, p. 48) and underscore the importance of accounting for diverse audience attitudes when implementing AI technologies in cultural communication.

5.3. Metaphysical dimension

The metaphysical dimension concerns the "blurring ontological boundaries surrounding what constitutes human, machine, and communication" (Guzman & Lewis, 2020, p. 82), a question that becomes especially salient when AI is deployed in culturally sensitive contexts. Once machines act as interlocutors in cross-cultural communication, the interaction is "no longer a human-only process" (p. 82). In this study, the three factors identified through participant responses exhibit varying degrees of human-centrism, with participants expressing views that diverged from prior reports of broadly positive public attitudes toward AI news anchors (Sun et al., 2024).

From the ritual perspective, this skepticism signals a deeper unease about whether AI anchors can participate in the symbolic maintenance of cultural meaning. As Carey (2009) argues, the ritual view emphasizes representation and renewal of shared belief rather than mere information transfer. Through journalism's mediated space, audiences reaffirm and extend these beliefs across borders (Peters, 2019). When audiences doubt AI anchors' empathy, authenticity, or credibility, they are questioning whether machines can perform the ritual work of anchoring a cultural community. This skepticism implies that AI may unsettle journalism's traditional role as a social institution with the power to "direct public attention, define issues and groups, and cause social cohesion or dissolution" (Peters, 2019, Ritual, Culture, and Mediated Communication section). These results highlight a central tension: when AI anchors serve as cultural mediators, audiences often perceive them as "constructed objects" (Guzman, 2020, p. 44) subordinate to human agency. This raises fundamental questions about whether technological mediation

can authentically convey cultural nuance and sustain the ritual bonds historically fostered by human communication.

Across all three factors, participants also recognized the impact of AI anchors on the ontological boundaries between humans and machines, prompting broader reflection on communication, representation, and cultural authority. Factor 1 strongly acknowledged AI's effects on career trajectories; Factor 2 advocated reexamining ethical and legal frameworks; and Factor 3 flagged concerns about bias and the absence of a human touch. These perspectives are contextualized by Anchor Z's observations on the broader implications of AI in cultural communication:

> The use of AI English news anchors in international communication is part of China's broader cultural promotion strategy. It is governed by state regulations. This application poses new challenges for content supervision and public opinion monitoring, compounded by linguistic and cultural pitfalls inherent in cross-cultural communication and limited expertise among supervisors. To address these issues, it may be necessary to cultivate cultural consultants and to review and refine existing supervision and management mechanisms to support this emerging mode of cultural promotion. (2 December 2024)

Taken together, these considerations show how integrating AI into our "ongoing and adaptive communication" (Guzman & Lewis, 2020, p. 81) reshapes conventional thinking and presents both challenges and opportunities for journalism, particularly in cross-cultural contexts where authenticity and cultural sensitivity are paramount.

6. Conclusion

This study finds that international audiences' perceptions of government-deployed AI English news anchors expose tensions between technological efficiency and authentic human communication. Some participants prioritize efficiency and cost-effectiveness; others express skepticism or endorse cautious collaboration, raising concerns about authenticity, emotional resonance, and ethical accountability. From a ritual perspective, these reservations stem not only from technical limitations but also from AI anchors' apparent difficulty in upholding the symbolic and emotional rituals essential to cross-cultural communication. Traditionally, media rituals are grounded in formalized human labor. They are symbolic practices that legitimize the media's role in reflecting social reality (Couldry, 2012, p. 66). The debate over whether AI anchors can embody cultural authority or authenticity shows how technological mediation is reshaping perceptions of "authentic" communication.

AI anchors may introduce new ritualized practices in cross-cultural communication, prompting audiences to renegotiate boundaries between humans and machines in cultural performance. Concerns voiced by different audience groups and by Anchor Z extend beyond regulation and ethics to the question of how these emerging practices may redefine journalism's role in sustaining collective meaning and cultural

belonging. As AI reconfigures communicative agency and cultural mediation, journalism's role in preserving cultural meaning and collective identity is challenged.

This study also has limitations. The relatively small sample size constrains generalizability. Future research should include larger, more representative samples to capture a broader range of international perspectives. Expanding recruitment to encompass a broader range of cultural backgrounds would deepen understanding of cross-cultural differences in the acceptance and interpretation of AI-generated news. Involving additional stakeholders, such as AI developers and government officials, would provide a more comprehensive view of the role of AI English news anchors in cross-cultural communication. Addressing these gaps can further enrich the discourse on AI-mediated communication and its implications for cultural meaning and identity.

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Ethics Statement

This study obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Review Committee of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen (EF20241014001). All methods performed in the study were carried out in accordance with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments, or with comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

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Appendix 1. Factor arrays

No.	Statements	F1	F2	F3
1	I believe AI English news anchors will replace human ones. (R)	2	-3	2
2	I find the Chinese cultural content presented by AI English news anchors to be rich and diverse. (F)	1	1	-1
3	I think the rise of AI English news anchors will influence whether people choose to pursue careers in journalism. (M)	4	1	2
4	I will watch programs featuring AI English news anchors together with others. (R)	0	2	-1
5	I trust that the information about Chinese local culture presented by AI English news anchors is reliable and accurate. (M)	0	-3	0
6	I feel that AI English news anchors are not interactive. (R)	3	-1	0
7	I would feel uncomfortable with AI English news anchors that are too close to human anchors. (M)	0	-4	-3
8	I notice that AI English news anchors have standard pronunciation and clear articulation when promoting Chinese local culture, making it easy to understand. (F)	2	3	3
9	The use of AI English news anchors may pose threats to data privacy and security. (M)	-2	0	0
10	I anticipate seeing collaborations between AI English news anchors and human anchors. (R)	1	4	-4
11	The voice of AI English news anchors (such as timbre, tone, and intonation) affects my acceptance of the information they deliver. (F)	1	2	3
12	I feel that AI English news anchors lack cultural understanding in international news broadcasting. (M)	2	0	-1
13	I will continue to watch programs where AI English news anchors promote Chinese local culture. (R)	-3	1	-1
14	I can develop an emotional connection with AI English news anchors. (R)	-4	-3	-2
15	AI English news anchors can reach a wider audience. (F)	0	4	4
16	The gender (male or female) of AI English news anchors impacts my acceptance of the information they present. (F)	-4	-4	1
17	I think AI English news anchors lack a unique personality. (M)	4	3	0
18	I find the body language of AI English news anchors to be natural and vivid. (F)	-3	2	3
19	I would become a fan of a particular AI English news anchor. (R)	-3	-1	-3
20	AI English news anchors maintain a high level of accuracy and avoid slips of the tongue. (F)	3	0	2
21	I believe the emergence of AI English news anchors will require us to re-examine existing ethical norms and laws. (M)	-1	3	1
22	I am excited about the possibility of AI English news anchors personalizing news content based on my preferences and feedback. (R)	-1	1	0
23	I would recommend AI English news anchors to others. (R)	-1	0	0
24	The appearance of AI English news anchors (such as facial features, hairstyle, and attire) influences my acceptance of the information they present. (F)	-2	-2	1
25	I feel that AI English news anchors lack empathy. (M)	2	0	-2
26	AI English news anchors can deliver news more timely than human anchors. (F)	3	-2	2
27	I believe AI English news anchors lack the ability for in-depth analysis. (M)	0	2	-2
28	After watching programs featuring AI English news anchors, I will develop an interest in experiencing Chinese local culture. (R)	-1	1	1
29	Compared to human anchors, using AI English news anchors to promote Chinese local culture and build the city's image is more cost-effective. (F)	1	0	4
30	I believe AI English news anchors have no bias when introducing Chinese local culture. (M)	1	-1	-2

31	I find that the content delivered by AI English news anchors is coherent with the pictures in the videos. (F)	-1	-2	-1
32	I will share my watching experience of the programs featuring AI English news anchors with others. (R)	-2	-1	-4
33	I think the rise of AI English news anchors will influence the way human anchors are educated. (M)	-2	-2	1
34	I enjoy watching the programs of Chinese local culture delivered by AI English news anchors. (R)	0	-1	-3

Note. F: Functional dimension; R: Relational dimension; M: Metaphysical dimension.

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Cartoons and Trade Conflict: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of *China Daily*'s Political Cartoons on the China-United States Trade Conflict

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Abstract

While the Sino-U.S. trade conflict, as one of the critical international issues with far-reaching consequences, has been studied from various perspectives, the study of political cartoons appears to have gone unnoticed in the extant literature. To address this gap, this study applied the multimodal discourse analysis framework to analyze 26 political cartoons published by *China Daily*, a major Chinese English-language news outlet. The investigation utilized a tripartite analytical framework—examining representational, interactive, and compositional meaning—to deconstruct visual rhetoric. The analysis consistently revealed that the cartoons strategically frame the United States as an aggressive and destabilizing force, with its trade policy visually portrayed as an inherent weapon of economic coercion. Crucially, this strategy was predominantly depicted as boomerang effects, producing undeniable and detrimental consequences both domestically for the U.S. and across the global economy. Through this sustained, sophisticated critique, the cartoons amplify the negative ideological attributes of U.S. trade policy, systematically constructing it and its instigators as an ideological outgroup opposing international stability.

Keywords

US-China trade conflict, political cartoons, multimodal discourse analysis, *China Daily*

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1. Introduction

The Sino-US economic relationship has been characterized by increasing strategic competition since January 2018, when the United States administration initiated a series of comprehensive tariff impositions on imports from China. This shift was formally underscored by the memorandum signed by then-President Donald Trump on March 22, 2018, which targeted China's economic practices and subsequently led to the announcement of a $50 billion tariff list on Chinese goods. In response, the Chinese government implemented commensurate retaliatory measures, announcing tariffs of an equivalent magnitude (Lu, 2018). This exchange effectively marked the escalation phase in economic tensions, crystallizing a significant friction point in bilateral relations. A triad of structural and policy-related concerns principally justified the actions of the U.S. side. These included perceived asymmetry stemming from China's persistent trade surplus, allegations of forced technology transfer, and the broader assessment of China's growing capabilities as a strategic challenge to U.S. national security interests. (Liu & Woo, 2018).

The profound reorientation of China–U.S. economic relations and the attendant risk of protracted trade friction elicited considerable apprehension across domestic (China and the U.S.) and international communities. Notably, in mid-April 2018, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) issued a clear caution, positing that a potential Sino-U.S. trade conflict could significantly compromise the trajectory of global economic growth (Giles, 2018). Complementary scholarship has further highlighted the adverse ripple effects of the bilateral trade dispute, specifically noting detrimental consequences not only for the U.S. agricultural sector but also for third-party economies worldwide (Elobeid et al., 2021). In a similar vein, Lee (2021) asserts that the Sino-U.S. trade dynamic is a fundamental driver of the restructuring of both global value chains and the architecture of international economic cooperation. Additionally, some scholars view the economic conflict as a sign of a larger geopolitical rivalry. Ahn, Liu, and Woo (2018), for instance, contend that the dynamics of bilateral trade are a manifest symptom of a systemic transition towards a multipolar global order, one in which the established U.S. hegemony faces substantive challenges. Consequently, it is argued that the fundamental impetus driving the escalating tensions between the world's two largest economies is primarily political—specifically, the strategic and hegemonic contest between the People's Republic of China and the United States—rather than being rooted solely in economic imbalances (Kim, 2019; Lee & Zulkefli, 2021).

In light of this geopolitical backdrop, media outlets play a crucial and strategic role in disseminating and framing this economic conflict for both domestic and international audiences. As a central state-run, English-language media platform in China, *China Daily* serves as a significant conduit for articulating the nation's official stance and perspective to the global sphere. Furthermore, in the increasingly digital and multimodal media environment, news is no longer conveyed exclusively through text (O'Halloran et al., 2021). Multimodal elements, particularly political cartoons and digital comics, have emerged as potent rhetorical tools for expressing commentary, shaping public narratives, and conveying complex ideological positions in an accessible and impactful format (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981; Prendergast, 2019). Consequently, these visual texts are not treated as mere illustrations but are analyzed as complex semiotic artifacts that actively participate in the construction and contestation of meaning. While the Sino-U.S.

trade war has been the subject of extensive academic and journalistic analysis (e.g., Li, 2020; Liyang et al., 2020; Tongkai, 2025), critical dimensions regarding the visual and multimodal framing of this discourse remain significantly underexplored. Therefore, this study is strategically positioned to address two critical lacunae within the current scholarly discourse. First, the extant literature on media coverage of the Sino-U.S. economic conflict has been overwhelmingly focused on textual analysis of news reports and official linguistic statements. There is a significant and discernible deficit in research that explicitly scrutinizes the role of political cartoons as a distinct and influential multimodal genre within this ideological contestation. This research directly fills that gap by providing a systematic analysis of these visual arguments. Second, given that trade tensions between China and the U.S. persist and are arguably escalating into what some contemporary analysts term a "second trade war" (e.g., Cordero, 2025; Rajah, 2025), understanding how national narratives are shaped is of paramount importance. This investigation, therefore, provides a timely and essential analysis of the People's Republic of China's official media stance, offering crucial insights into its established attitude and ideological positioning at this pivotal geopolitical juncture.

This study will therefore empirically investigate the multimodal discourse of China Daily by examining how it uses political cartoons in its news reports to frame the Sino-US tariff conflict during the critical first six months of the new US presidential administration (January 20 - July 30, 2025). Through a systematic analysis of the interplay between image and accompanying text, this research seeks to uncover the underlying ideological projections and official stances disseminated by this key Chinese media source at a juncture marked by political transition and persistent bilateral tension. To achieve this, the analysis focuses on three interrelated lines of inquiry: first, how key actors, pivotal events, and central concepts related to the tariff conflict are semantically and visually represented by *China Daily*; second, what specific rhetorical strategies are employed to position China and the United States to construct a particular narrative regarding their respective roles and responsibilities in the conflict; and finally, through what multimodal mechanisms these cartoons convey ideological stances on trade policy and international relations.

2. Literature review

Within the broader landscape of political discourse, political cartoons serve as potent, inherently multimodal tools of persuasion. They constitute a complex communicative genre, skillfully integrating verbal and non-verbal elements to exert influence upon the audience's affective responses, ideological stances, and behavioral dispositions (Eldin & Tawwab, 2024). The persuasive impact of this genre is achieved through rhetorical techniques such as irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, metaphor, and symbolism, solidifying their role as significant instruments of propaganda and persuasion. Crucially, the implicit nature of the visual message requires active interpretive engagement from the viewer to decode the cartoonist's intended meaning, thereby rendering the persuasive process highly participatory and, consequently, more potent (Movchan et al., 2023).

Similarly, Kotzé (1988) argues that cartoons are not merely humorous sketches but powerful communicative tools that condense complex political realities, reinforce or challenge ideologies, and actively mobilize political support. He outlines three general functions for cartoons (Kotzé, 1988, pp. 63–65):

> Condensation: A cartoon freezes a broad spectrum of political ideas and events into a single, powerful image.
>
> Simplification: Cartoons reduce a confusing and complex political reality to a simple, intelligible form.
>
> Mobilization and propaganda: Another primary function of a cartoon is to make propaganda for or against a cause.

Political cartoons, due to their influential role in public discourse, have become a prominent subject of academic study worldwide. For example, scholarly investigation has extensively examined how these visual artifacts function as forms of visual rhetoric and persuasion. Political cartoons are recognized as rhetorical artifacts situated at the intersection of journalism and popular culture, and their rhetorical power is seen as stemming from the cartoonist's ability to draw on their readers' collective consciousness. Scholars like Conners (2007) have explored this approach, noting that popular culture references make cartoons more relatable and persuasive by tapping into shared knowledge and sentiments. The effectiveness of this reliance depends on the audience's familiarity with the cultural source the cartoon refers to.

In another interesting study, Felicia (2021) employed Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic analytical framework to critically examine selected political cartoons sourced from Nigerian newspaper websites. The aim was to examine how cartoonists reproduce or challenge unequal gender power relations in Nigeria's socio-political context. Findings showed that political cartoons in Nigerian newspapers serve as platforms where women are often represented—or misrepresented—through established stereotypes. The analysis further demonstrated that cartoonists utilize various semiotic resources to depict power dynamics between male and female figures in Nigeria.

The utility of analyzing political cartoons through a multimodal lens is further substantiated by contemporary scholarly applications of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). For instance, Lennon and Kilby (2020) adopted an MCDA approach to investigate political cartoons published around the 2016 Brexit referendum, demonstrating that these visuals constitute a potent discursive site where national identity is negotiated and forms of banal nationalism are articulated. Their analysis revealed how multimodal resources are used to create satirical yet ambiguous discourse that, while offering critiques, simultaneously simplifies and obscures complex political realities, ultimately reinforcing a specific, often narrowly framed, national narrative.

Concurrently, the applicability of this rigorous methodology to state-sanctioned media, particularly in the Chinese context, is evidenced by research such as Deng (2023). Deng's multimodal discourse analysis of the official posters for the 19th Asian Games Hangzhou 2022 concluded that the visual grammar framework effectively uncovers how a multimodal design works synergistically to promote themes of unity, friendship, and cultural pride.

Beyond domestic politics, the MCDA framework has been consistently and effectively deployed to examine media framing of major international geopolitical conflicts and their subsequent global reception. Makaruk, Zablotskyi, and Charikova (2025), for example, employed the MCDA framework to analyze how Western media represented the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, concluding that these cartoons are not neutral but serve as a persuasive medium that simplifies complex issues into accessible imagery. Their contention—that political cartoons are potent instruments in sanctions-related discourse, capable of either reinforcing solidarity or undermining it—establishes the crucial, active role of the medium in high-stakes economic and political warfare.

Furthermore, studies such as Gondwe and Walcott (2024), which used Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Semiotics to examine the visual framing of the 2023 Israel–Palestine conflict, demonstrate how cartoons reveal ideological divergence on a global scale. Their analysis revealed a notable inclination toward supporting one side, particularly in media from the Global South, contrasting with the often more aligned perspectives of mainstream Western media. Gondwe and Walcott (2024) ultimately concluded that editorial cartoons are powerful, fearlessly succinct ideological tools for communicating complex political issues through symbolism, metaphor, and textual cues.

Collectively, these empirical investigations establish a strong scholarly precedent for the present study, validating the use of multimodal to examine how a non-Western, state-affiliated media outlet (*China Daily*) employs visual rhetoric to navigate and project its unique stance on a global geopolitical rivalry (the Sino-US conflict).

In a nutshell, political cartoons function as a powerful communicative genre, leveraging their multimodal nature to persuade audiences. They effectively simplify intricate political matters into digestible content through symbolism, metaphor, and text. However, a critical review of the scholarly landscape reveals a significant lacuna about the Sino-US economic and strategic conflict. While political cartoons are broadly recognized as significant vehicles of political discourse, they have not been systematically scrutinized in relation to this high-stakes bilateral dispute. Prior research has predominantly focused on verbal discourse and employed comparative and/or corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate news coverage across various outlets (e.g., Li, 2020, 2021; Liyang et al., 2020; Tongkai, 2025; Wang & Ge, 2020). In sharp contrast, the specialized analysis of political cartoons as a distinct, influential multimodal genre within this contentious context remains a nascent and largely unexplored terrain. Therefore, this study is methodologically and thematically compelled to illuminate this important, under-researched dimension of official Chinese news production.

3. Method

This section is presented in two parts. First, it outlines the study's theoretical framework; second, it describes the data collection and analysis procedures.

3.1. Theoretical framework

To analyze the political cartoons, we will be using Kress and van Leeuwen's framework (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). The theoretical underpinnings of this model are rooted in Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar and his socio-semiotic theory of language. (Halliday, 1978, 1985), which links textual meaning and the semantic system of language to their broader sociocultural setting, highlighting that language mirrors social structures.

Grounded in Halliday's (1978, 1985) model of language as a system organized around three metafunctions—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) propose that every semiotic mode, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, operates through comparable metafunctions. Building on this premise, they formulated a visual grammar comprising three parallel metafunctions: representational (representing the experiential world), interactive (interacting with viewers), and compositional (arranging visual resources into a cohesive message). Each metafunction is manifested through distinct semiotic resources, which enable analysts to decipher the messages and meanings an image conveys:

> The Representational Metafunction (Ideational): Concerns how images represent the world (e.g., actions, concepts).
>
> The Interactive Metafunction (Interpersonal): Examines how images create a relationship with the viewer or between the represented participants (e.g., gaze, angle).
>
> The Compositional Metafunction (Textual): Analyzes how elements are arranged to create a coherent whole (e.g., layout, salience).

This approach is particularly adept at uncovering the conceptual metaphors at play in visual arguments and understanding their persuasive effects.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach based on a complete census of political cartoons published by *China Daily* regarding the trade conflict. The data were collected from the outlet's official website, focusing on the critical six-month period from January 20, 2025, to July 30, 2025, following the U.S. presidential transition. This website is also one of China's most influential English-language media platforms and a significant source of information on the country's politics, economy, society, and culture (*About China Daily*, n.d.).

A distinctive feature of *China Daily*'s digital format is the publication of "visual editorials"—standalone entries consisting solely of a political cartoon without accompanying journalistic text. To construct the corpus, an exhaustive search was conducted using the specific keywords "Tariffs" and "United States". This process yielded 26 unique entries. Since the objective was to analyze the outlet's total visual output on this topic, no sampling strategy was used. All 26 cartoons identified within the timeframe were included in the analysis, ensuring the findings reflect the media outlet's comprehensive narrative stance rather than a selective subset.

The analysis was rigorously grounded in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) Visual Grammar. Given that these cartoons function as standalone texts, the visual mode serves as the primary carrier of meaning. The framework was applied across three interrelated dimensions to deconstruct the specific ideological stance *China Daily* projects.

Regarding representational meaning (RQ1), this stage focused on the experiential world constructed in the cartoons. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (2021, pp. 44-112), the analysis distinguished between two primary structures. First, narrative structures—representing the "unfolding of actions and events, processes of change" (p. 76)—were analyzed by identifying vectors (implied lines of action) to determine key participants (Actors and Goals) and the nature of the process. Second, conceptual structures—representing the "generalized, stable and timeless essence" (p. 76) of participants—were examined by identifying classificational, analytical, and symbolic patterns.

According to the interactive meaning (RQ2), this dimension examined the relationship between the represented participants (RPs) and the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 113). The analysis examined three key parameters: Contact, Social Distance, and Subjective Attitude. Contact was determined by whether the figure's gaze creates a direct address (a "Demand") or is averted, presenting the figure as an object of observation (an "Offer") (pp. 117–118). Social distance was assessed through shot proximity (close, medium, or long) to determine the degree of intimacy or detachment (p. 123). Finally, subjective attitude was analyzed along two angular dimensions: involvement, defined by the horizontal angle (frontal vs. oblique) (pp. 135-136), and power relations, defined by the vertical angle (high, low, or eye-level) (pp. 138-139).

Finally, compositional meaning focused on how representational and interactive elements are arranged into a coherent whole. This analysis assessed three systems: information value, realized by the cultural significance of placement zones such as Left (Given) vs. Right (New), and Top (Ideal) vs. Bottom (Real) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 181); framing, which utilizes devices like frame lines or space to connect or separate elements (pp. 181-182); and salience, which determines the prominence of elements through features such as foregrounding, size, sharpness, and color contrast (p. 182).

Following this three-stage analysis, the analysis will proceed in three corresponding stages, specifically designed to address the research questions: first, Representational Analysis, which focuses on what is represented, scrutinizing how key actors (China, the U.S.), objects, and events of the tariff conflict are visually constructed through techniques like caricature, symbolism, and typification; second, Interactive

Analysis, which focuses on the relationship between the producer (cartoonist) and the viewer, examining how the image constructs a specific connection with the audience through elements such as gaze, social distance, and perspective (angle); and finally, Compositional Analysis, which focuses on the overall structure of the image, analyzing how elements are organized within the frame (e.g., information value, salience, and framing) to convey thematic importance and ideological hierarchy.

4. Results and discussion

For ease of reference and efficiency, the cartoons were assigned alphanumeric codes from C-1 to C-26. The following sub-sections present the findings organized into three thematic areas: representational, interactive, and compositional meaning.

4.1. Representational meaning

The analysis of the 26 political cartoons revealed a clear predominance of narrative representation, accounting for approximately 80% of the corpus (n=21), while conceptual representation was employed in only five instances. This finding is significant because narrative structures—images in which actors perform actions, thereby depicting a story or sequence of events—are inherently more dynamic and effective at constructing a specific, actionable political stance than static, conceptual ones.

Narrative representations can be categorized as either transactional or non-transactional. In non-transactional structures, "a vector, formed by a (usually diagonal) depicted element, or an arrow, emanates from an Actor but does not lead to another participant" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 71). Conversely, transactional narratives involve an Actor acting towards a Goal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 48). Furthermore, transactional structures are classified as unidirectional or bidirectional. A unidirectional action is characterized by a vector that "connects two participants – an Actor, the participant from which the vector emanates, and a Goal, the participant at which the vector is directed." In a bidirectional structure, however, each participant simultaneously functions as both Actor and Goal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 61), indicating reciprocal action in which they act upon one another.

The dominance of unidirectional transactional narratives (19 of 21) is highly significant, visually framing the conflict not as a mutual interaction, but as unilateral aggression. In 17 of these instances, the United States (Uncle Sam) functions as the Actor, consistently characterized as a destabilizing agent. He is depicted wielding weaponized instruments—such as grenades (C-1), spiked clubs (C-2, C-5, C-9, C-14, C-25), and hammers (C-24)—to inflict direct harm on the global economy (C-6, C-16) or developing nations (C-23). Conversely, his actions frequently lead to self-sabotage, as evidenced by ineffective economic repairs (C-13, C-17) or hospitalization (C-10). In the remaining two instances (e.g., C-18, Figure 1), the visual syntax shifts: 'tariffs' are personified as the Actor physically attacking Uncle Sam (the Goal). This metaphor redefines U.S. trade policy not as a tool of statecraft but as an autonomous, self-destructive force.

Figure 1. C-18 (2025-05-12 09:26)

Similarly, C-21 expands this internal critique by personifying ‘inflation’, ‘racism’, and ‘debt’ as Actors incapacitating Uncle Sam. Titled ‘An American Dilemma’, this framing positions the U.S. as paralyzed by systemic domestic crises rather than external threats. By visualizing these internal issues—alongside trade policy—as autonomous aggressors, the discourse effectively absolves China of responsibility, reframing the conflict as a self-inflicted American tragedy driven by structural instability.

When Uncle Sam functions as the Actor, he consistently employs instruments symbolically labeled ‘tariffs’. These instruments are predominantly weaponized, appearing as spiked clubs (C-2, C-5, C-14, C-25), hammers (C-24), or wrecking balls labeled ‘chaos’ (C-22). Other metaphorical tools emphasize economic mismanagement or exploitation, such as a pump failing to inflate the economy (C-17) or straws used to extract resources from developing nations (C-23). This systematic labeling ensures that the 'instrument' of U.S. policy is visually synonymous with physical destruction and coercion.

Furthermore, in these unidirectional transactional actions where Uncle Sam is the Actor, the Goals are diverse and symbolically charged. They include a tariff-labeled grenade (C-1); an egg representing the U.S. consumers (C-2); a panda symbolizing China (C-3); the U.S. dollar, denoting the domestic economy (C-5); and a small globe representing the world economy (C-6). Other Goals feature Uncle Sam himself (C-10); an assortment of weapons and hazards, such as a bear trap, a spiked club, a bomb, and a hornet’s nest (C-11); spears representing opposing economies (C-12); and a balloon mismatched and hastily stitched (C-13). Further targets are a chessboard labeled “International Trade Rules” (C-14); penguins,

illustrating the irrationality of blanket tariffs (C-15); a train symbolizing the world economy (C-16); a balloon with visible leaks representing the U.S. economy (C-17); the structural foundation of the U.S. itself (C-22); cups held by developing countries, signifying their resources (C-23); the global supply chain (C-24); and potential future targets of tariffs (C-25).

In contrast, in the bidirectional transactional actions, the interactants are Uncle Sam (personifying the U.S.) and an anthropomorphized dartboard (C-19), depicted with arms and legs. This structure positions both participants as both Actor and Goal simultaneously. The darts function as the instrument, and their container is explicitly labeled "tariffs." The cartoon conveys that the darts—representing tariffs—intended as a weapon against other economies are now boomeranging back, with Uncle Sam becoming the target of retaliatory tariffs and fleeing them. In a second cartoon, the interactants are Uncle Sam and a figure resembling the Chinese Monkey King (C-26). The instruments are rocks labeled "tariffs." Uncle Sam is shown throwing these tariff rocks toward the Chinese warrior, who, in turn, blocks or counters the attack with his staff.

In terms of conceptual structures, Kress and van Leeuwen (2021, p. 83) represent "participants as parts of a whole – they display a Carrier (the whole) and any number of Possessive Attributes (the parts)". This is exemplified in Figure 2, where the Carrier is the balance scale labeled "tariffs" symbolizing the system of economic policy. Its Possessive Attributes include the two pans: the right pan, labeled "U.S." and filled with many heavy weights, representing the United States' heavy-handed and dominant approach to imposing tariffs. In stark contrast, the left pan, holding a single, lighter weight, symbolizes the unequal burden placed upon the other side in the trade dispute (implicitly China or other trading partners). The pronounced tilt of the scale, a traditional symbol of fairness, effectively conveys the visual metaphor that US tariffs skew the balance of international trade, explicitly favoring an unfair US economic policy.

Figure 2. C-3 (2025-03-21 08:19)

Conceptual structures further deconstruct the intrinsic nature of U.S. policy. In C-7, the Carrier—a hot air balloon revealed to be a grenade labeled 'tariffs'—is tethered to a basket labeled 'US economy'. This composite structure reframes trade policy not as a tool of economic uplift, but as a live weapon threatening the very economy it supports. Similarly, C-8 defines the U.S. negotiating style through the attributes of a gambler, utilizing poker chips and playing cards to visualize the 'Art of the Deal' as a high-stakes adversarial contest. Finally, C-9 exposes the inherent duality of U.S. diplomacy; Uncle Sam is defined by the simultaneous possession of a pen ('time to talk') and a concealed spiked club, conceptually characterizing American negotiation as an underlying coercion.

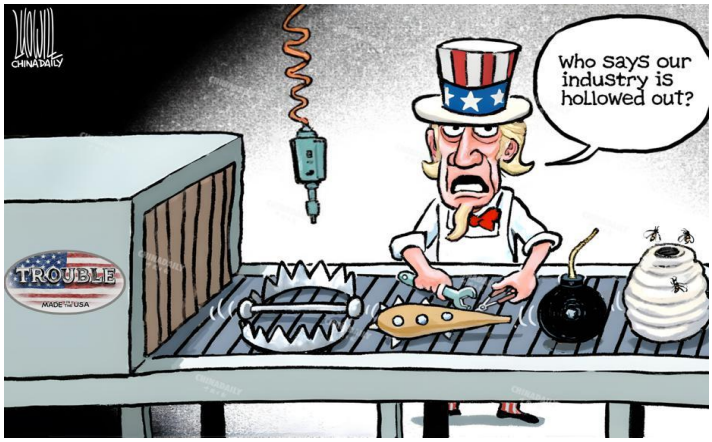
Finally, the internal political framing of the US highlights a narrative of elite manipulation and citizen disempowerment, linking the tariff policy to a broader dysfunctional political process. In C-20, the Republican Party (represented as an elephant) is the Carrier and is shown as the one who selects and presents. The attributes include the candidate, who is defined by exaggerated qualities (tattoos, dress, the slogan reading "big beautiful bill"), and the U.S. people, represented by Uncle Sam, who are positioned as the addressee—the ones to whom the offering is made. Uncle Sam's small stature represents the disempowered U.S. people, the elephant's grin manifests manipulation, and the bill smiles and poses with a heart, which is an ironic display of desirability that contradicts her grotesque appearance.

These representational patterns critically extend existing scholarship on Chinese crisis communication. While previous textual analyses (e.g., Li, 2020; Tongkai, 2025) have noted that Chinese news reports frequently employ a "victimhood" narrative to deflect blame in trade conflicts, the current multimodal analysis reveals that this is not merely a semantic strategy but a structural one. By consistently assigning the role of "Actor" to the United States in unidirectional transactions (17 of 19 cases), the cartoons visually rigidify the aggressor-victim dichotomy more definitively than linguistic text, which often relies on passive voice to obscure agency. Furthermore, the reliance on personification—where "tariffs" become autonomous enemies attacking Uncle Sam—diverges from the typical conventions of Western political cartoons, which generally focus on caricaturing specific political leaders. Instead, *China Daily* appears to be constructing a systemic critique of U.S. policy itself, framing the trade war not as a clash of personalities, but as a structural failure of Western governance.

4.2. Interactive meaning

The dimension of contact, a key aspect of interactive meaning, was dominated by the 'offer' modality. Within the dataset, all but one cartoon (C-11) function as an "offer" meaning the depicted participants do not directly engage the viewer's gaze. This visual strategy intentionally positions the viewer as a neutral observer, promoting an indirect mode of address that facilitates a more detached and rational evaluation of the political events and ideologies being presented.

Figure 3. C-11 (2025-04-23 08:30)



The strategic employment of visual distance and angle effectively modulates the audience's psychological positioning relative to the conflict. The analysis of social distance revealed a purposeful distribution of shots: while the fifteen medium shots foster a general sense of involved observation without intimacy, the five close-up shots—such as C-6, magnifying the U.S.'s violent act of grating the global economy—are deployed to position the viewer uncomfortably near the action, thereby provoking a powerful, visceral emotional reaction against the US policy. In medium shots, such as C-11 where Uncle Sam produces hazardous weapons, the frame captures the figure from the waist up. This proximity allows for a clear reading of facial expression and contextual details, fostering a sense of involvement without intimacy. Conversely, the medium-long shot used in C-26 captures the full figures in action (Uncle Sam and the Chinese warrior Monkey King fighting each other), facilitating the recognition of body language and symbolic elements like costumes and weapons, thereby emphasizing the broader narrative context.

The dimension of involvement, analyzed through horizontal angle, shows a near-even distribution within the dataset: twelve cartoons employ a frontal angle, while fourteen utilize an oblique angle. A frontal angle positions the viewer as involved in the depicted scene, directly aligning them with the action. Conversely, an oblique angle creates a sense of detachment, framing the viewer as an onlooker to the events or conceptual structures. This distinction can be illustrated, for example, by C-23 and C-22. In C-23, which depicts Uncle Sam sucking the blood of developing countries, the frontal angle directly implicates the viewer in the exploitative act. In contrast, Figure 4, which shows Uncle Sam using a wrecking ball labeled "chaos" to destroy his own crane, uses an oblique angle to position the viewer as a detached observer of the self-inflicted chaos.

Figure 4. C-22 (2025-06-12 07:17)

Analysis of the vertical angle across the dataset identified 18 instances of an eye-level angle, 5 of a high angle, and 3 of a low angle. These compositional choices were strategically employed to convey specific ideological messages. For instance, in C-15, where Uncle Sam is shown imposing tariffs on penguins, the eye-level angle positions the viewer as an equal participant, thereby inviting a critical assessment of the bureaucratic action. In contrast, C-10 utilizes a high angle, looking down on a hospitalized Uncle Sam from a superior vantage point to emphasize his vulnerability and diminished state. Conversely, C-18 employs a low-angle perspective as a muscular personification of "tariffs" delivers a powerful punch that throws Uncle Sam backward. This angle positions the viewer in a subordinate role, visually reinforcing the aggressor's overwhelming dominance.

The interactive strategies revealed here—particularly the near-total absence of the "demand" gaze—complicate current academic discussions regarding China's shift toward aggressive "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy (Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023; Sullivan & Wang, 2023). While the cartoons' content is undeniably confrontational, their mode of address remains conservative and distinctly rational. By utilizing the "offer" gaze combined with a predominance of eye-level angles, *China Daily* avoids the direct, coercive emotional appeals often found in domestic propaganda or Western political satire (which frequently demands viewer compliance). Instead, these choices strategically position the international viewer as a detached, rational judge of the events. This visual rhetoric aligns with the "discursive power" strategy described in recent political communication scholarship, in which state media seeks to build global consensus not through emotional agitation but by presenting its ideological stance as an objective, observable reality that appeals to the viewer's logic rather than their loyalty.

4.3. Compositional meaning

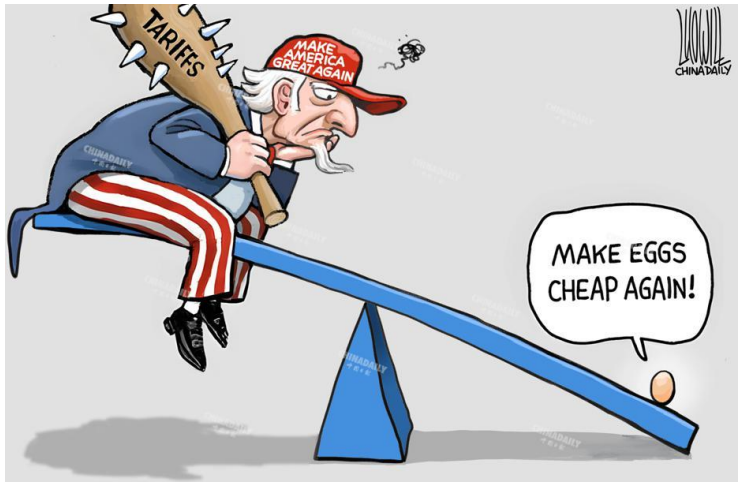
The compositional aspect is analyzed through three components: information value, framing, and salience. Kress and van Leeuwen define information value as "the placement of elements […] which gives specific informational values attached to the various zones of the image: left and right, top and bottom,

center and margin" (2021, p. 181). According to their framework, a left-right structure positions the left element as the "Given"—an established, agreed-upon point of departure—while the right presents the "New" information that demands the viewer's attention (2021, p. 217). In a top-bottom structure, the upper section represents the "Ideal," offering the generalized or idealized essence of the message, whereas the lower section provides the "Real," supplying factual or practical details (2021, p. 217). Finally, a center-margin structure may be used, in which a central element is surrounded by peripheral elements that are often arranged symmetrically (2021, p. 218).

The analysis of the 26 cartoons reveals a distinct, purposeful pattern along the left-right axis that reinforces the Chinese official narrative of US causality and consequences. In depictions in which the United States is shown as the aggressor (bullying, imposing rules, or exerting force), it is typically positioned on the left side of the frame. This placement frames such aggressive actions as "Given"—a known, habitual, and established point of departure for the U.S. Examples include imposing tariffs on penguins (C-15), accusing a panda representing China (C-4), and undermining international trade rules (C-14). Conversely, when the U.S. is depicted facing the consequences of its own actions, it is usually placed on the right. This positioning treats the outcome (e.g., self-inflicted harm or resistance) as the "New" information, demanding the viewer's attention as the inevitable result of the "Given" action. Instances of this include a hospitalized Uncle Sam (C-10), a knight facing resistance from other nations (C-12), and Uncle Sam endangered by an imminent explosion (C-7). This structural deployment effectively organizes the message ideologically, consistently establishing the US as the "Given" initiator of aggression and chaos, while highlighting the negative outcomes (on the right) as the "New" urgent consequences that the international audience must acknowledge.

The top-bottom structure consistently positions the upper section as the "Ideal" —representing the generalized, often asserted, ideological essence of the message—while the lower section provides the "Real" detailing the specific, practical, or factual consequences. In the corpus, this dimension is used to present a direct visual argument that contrasts rhetoric with a detrimental outcome. Tariffs are consistently positioned in the "Ideal" (top) section of the image, representing their ideological premise or assertion of power. Their damaging "Real" (bottom) consequences are then explicitly displayed below. For instance, in Figure 5, a tariff club is held aloft in the Ideal, while the Real section depicts its negative impact on the U.S. people and economy, critically underscored by the subverted slogan "make eggs cheap again". Similarly, in C-5, the tariff club occupies the top position, but the Real consequence shown is the drowning U.S. dollar sign, symbolizing economic self-harm.

Figure 5. C-2 (2025-03-20 07:53)



The center dramatizes a central paradox: the very instrument intended to empower the United States is depicted as inherently destructive, absurd, and ultimately self-defeating. This is exemplified in C-1, where a grenade labeled “tariffs” is poised to detonate and harm Uncle Sam himself. A similar irony is evident in C-18 and C-19, where tariffs, initially conceived as a tool of national defense, are shown to counter American interests, thereby undermining the nation's own interests. In summary, the compositional analysis reveals that the U.S. tariffs are consistently framed as ideologically assertive in their conception (Ideal, Given, left) yet materially detrimental in their consequences (Real, New, right), with the central element crystallizing the core paradox of self-inflicted damage and global disruption.

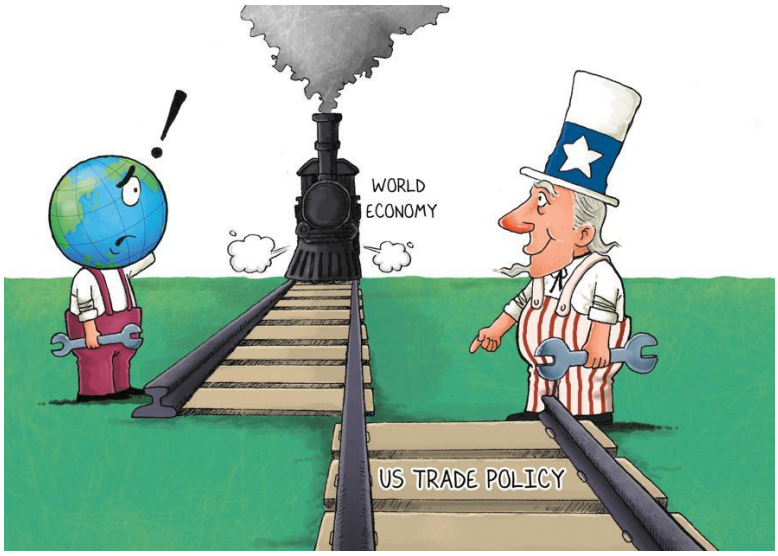
The analysis of framing techniques identified the salient type employed in each cartoon, a necessary focus given that meaning is often constructed through a mixture of techniques. The distribution of these salient types is as follows: integration was used in 14 cases, visual contrast in 9, and separation in 3. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2021, pp. 218-219), integration, a type of connection framing, occurs when “two or more distinct elements occupy the same space – for instance, written text may be superimposed on an image, or images may be integrated in a collage without being separated by frame lines.” Conversely, visual contrast and separation are types of disconnection framing. Visual contrast takes place when “two or more elements differ in terms of some visual or typographic quality, for instance, color or degree of boldness, to indicate that they are meant to be understood as distinct elements.” Separation, meanwhile, means “two or more elements are separated by space to indicate that they are meant to be understood as similar in some respects and different in others.”

China Daily employs integration framing to fuse textual and visual elements into a unified, unavoidable metaphor. For example, in C-1, the cartoonist superimposes the word “tariffs” onto the grenade, compelling the viewer to read the image and text as a single, explosive statement that is about to be detonated by Uncle Sam. This explicit integration renders the political message immediate and unavoidable, as the text and imagery are indivisible from the act of meaning-making. In contrast, C-14 utilizes visual contrast to dramatize a fundamental imbalance in trade relations. On the left, a muscular,

aggressive Uncle Sam, wearing stars and stripes, wields a spiked club. On the right, a suited man maneuvers traditional chess pieces on a board labeled "international trade rules." The stark visual contrast between brute force and strategic gameplay underscores the conflict between unilateral aggression and rule-based diplomacy.

Furthermore, separation framing is employed to visualize geopolitical division: in Figure 6, the globe and Uncle Sam are positioned on opposite sides of a broken railway track, with space between them. This dramatic separation visually underscores the schism between the United States and the global community, showing them facing the same systemic rupture from opposing, disconnected standpoints.

Figure 6. C-16 (2025-05-07 07:19)



Salience is defined as "the degree to which an element in a composition draws attention to itself, due to its size, its place in the foreground, its color, its tonal values, its sharpness or definition and other features" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 220). The analysis of the 26 political cartoons shows a distinct, narrow pattern in which the conflict is framed around two principal components. In the majority of the corpus (15 cartoons, approximately 58%), the most salient element is the portrayal of tariffs as a weapon or destructive tool (e.g., a club, a grenade, a wrecking ball). This visual dominance reinforces the core ideological message that the US trade policy is fundamentally an act of physical and economic aggression. The secondary but still significant focus is the consequence of this aggression: seven cartoons (27%) feature the U.S. or world economy as the primary, most visually emphasized victim of this policy. This quantitative distribution confirms that *China Daily*'s compositional strategy is overwhelmingly focused on establishing the tangible threat of US tariffs and highlighting their consequences on the global stage, thereby justifying a defensive posture and emphasizing the systemic damage caused by US unilateralism.

The remaining four cartoons are defined by other salient elements that further detail the policy's failure: an export tariff form (C-15), patches on a balloon labeled "tariff policy" (C-13), a conveyor belt of hazardous items produced by the U.S. (C-11), and a tattooed figure labeled "big beautiful bill" (C-20).

This quantitative distribution confirms that *China Daily*'s compositional strategy is overwhelmingly focused on establishing the physical and economic threat posed by US tariffs and highlighting their consequences on the global stage.

Finally, the compositional patterns identified here provide empirical support for the theory of "ideological naturalization" central to Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (MCDS). By systematically positioning U.S. aggression in the "Given" (left) zone, *China Daily* visually codifies American hostility as an established, uncontested premise—a historical fact that requires no further proof—while framing the resulting chaos in the "New" (correct) zone as the urgent reality requiring international attention. This structural choice effectively shifts the discursive focus from debating the causes of the trade war to managing its consequences. Furthermore, the high salience of weaponized instruments performs a critical framing function: it visually reclassifies the Sino-U.S. tariff conflict from the genre of "economic dispute" to the genre of "hegemonic warfare". This compositional strategy reinforces the study's broader argument that *China Daily* is not merely reporting on trade policy but actively constructing a visual reality in which U.S. governance is fundamentally incompatible with global stability.

5. Conclusion

This study examined 26 political cartoons from *China Daily*. The analysis, conducted across the three dimensions of meaning—representational, interactive, and compositional—revealed a sophisticated, highly consistent strategy that cartoonists leveraged to convey specific political and ideological messages to the international audience.

The findings demonstrate a highly asymmetrical representation of actors. The United States, typically personified as Uncle Sam, is portrayed exclusively as the agent of destabilization. This is evidenced by the structural finding that the U.S. functions as the Actor in 17 of the 19 unidirectional transactional representations, consistently engaged in aggressive behaviors—such as imposing rules or inflicting economic violence—using instruments explicitly labeled "tariffs". China, by contrast, appears in only two instances and is symbolized through culturally resonant figures such as the panda or the Monkey King. In these limited roles, China is predominantly cast as the Goal or a reactive participant, a strategy that visually signals restraint in the face of provocation or victimhood. Furthermore, the study revealed a critical rhetorical move: abstract notions such as "tariffs," "inflation," and "chaos" are personified and transformed into autonomous agents or instruments in the visual narrative. Conceptual representations decisively strengthen this ideological critique by depicting systemic imbalance (e.g., tilted scales) and strategic manipulation (e.g., the poker metaphor), thereby framing the tariff conflict as a contest between unilateral coercion and a necessary, rule-based defense.

The visual and textual strategies employed by *China Daily* are tightly integrated to construct a narrative of US self-destruction and Chinese resilience. The U.S. is visually characterized by exaggerated features—such as being armored, sweating, or grotesque—and is often engaged in irrational or self-defeating behavior. Instruments such as clubs, grenades, and hammers are explicitly labeled "tariffs",

supporting the core metaphor of aggressive economic warfare. China's portrayal, conversely, is consistently marked by composure, cultural symbolism, and physical efficacy, often successfully resisting or deflecting U.S. actions (e.g., the Monkey King's counter-action). Textual elements—including slogans, labels, and speech bubbles—are used to clarify and intensify these visual metaphors. For instance, the parody slogan "make eggs cheap again" satirizes the domestic economic fallout, while labels like "tariffs" on weapons highlight the destructive intent behind U.S. policy. Collectively, these strategies construct a narrative in which the U.S. is positioned as the unjust initiator of conflict and China as the strategic, culturally justified counterforce.

The critical ideological stance on trade, nationalism, and international relations is conveyed through a seamless combination of multimodal resources. The structural dominance of transactional representations foregrounds agency and consequence, with the U.S. frequently depicted as both the aggressor and the resulting victim of its own flawed policies. Conceptual structures further solidify the critique of systemic imbalance and adversarial strategic approaches. The prevalence of the "offer" structure strategically situates the viewers as detached observers, enabling them to evaluate the visual evidence of US failure rationally. This rational distance is selectively manipulated through variations in shot distance and angle; for example, close-ups intensify the visceral violence of economic actions, while low angles emphasize the dominance of personified tariffs over a vulnerable Uncle Sam. Further, spatial arrangement critically reinforces the ideological critique. The U.S. is consistently placed on the left ("Given"), symbolizing habitual aggression, while the negative consequences appear on the right ("New"), thereby demanding viewer attention. The Ideal (top) zone features the assertive rhetoric of tariffs, contrasted directly with their damaging Real (bottom) effects, visually underscoring the disjunction between policy and material outcome. Furthermore, framing techniques—such as integration, visual contrast (brute force vs. chess), and separation (US vs. globe)—dramatize ideological tension and reinforce the narrative of US isolation.

These findings expand upon existing scholarship on Chinese external communication by shifting focus from linguistic to visual rhetoric. While textual studies identify themes of 'victimhood', this analysis demonstrates how such narratives are reified through interactive power relations and compositional hierarchies (e.g., the 'Visual Contrast' in C-14). However, the sample of 26 cartoons, while sufficient for qualitative depth, excludes Chinese domestic platforms. Additionally, the study analyzes only the production of discourse, leaving audience reception unexplored. Future research should address these gaps by comparing *China Daily* with Western counterparts or investigating audience decoding. Ultimately, this study confirms that these cartoons function not merely as illustrations but as complex semiotic artifacts. By visually encoding the U.S. as a source of 'chaos' and 'self-harm', they strive to reframe the trade war from a policy dispute to a fundamental question of international rationality.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix 1. Cartoons and their designated alphanumeric code

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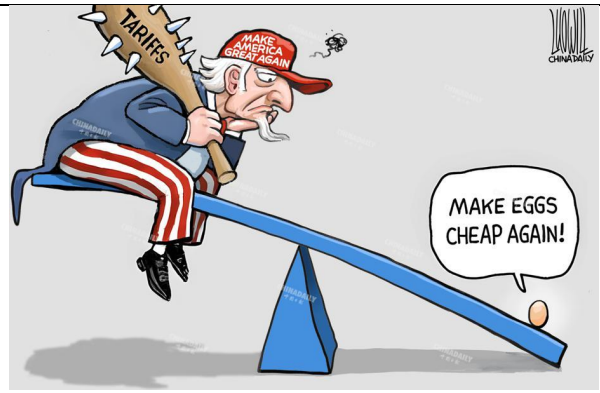


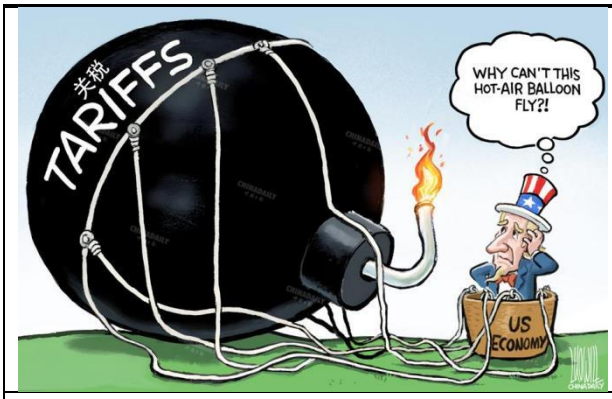
C-2 (2025-03-20 07:53)

C-3 (2025-03-21 08:19)

C-4 (2025-03-26 10:14)

C-5 (2025-04-09 08:00)

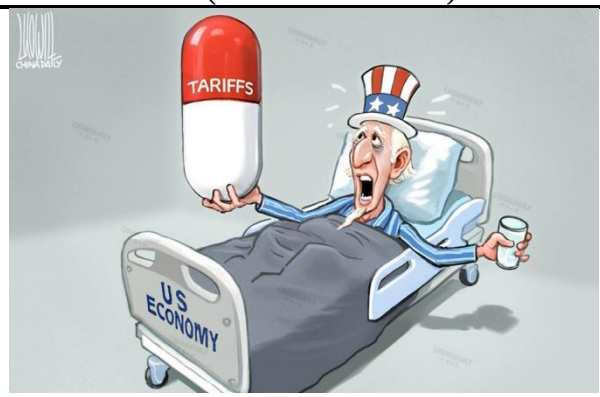
C-6 (2025-04-09 11:04)



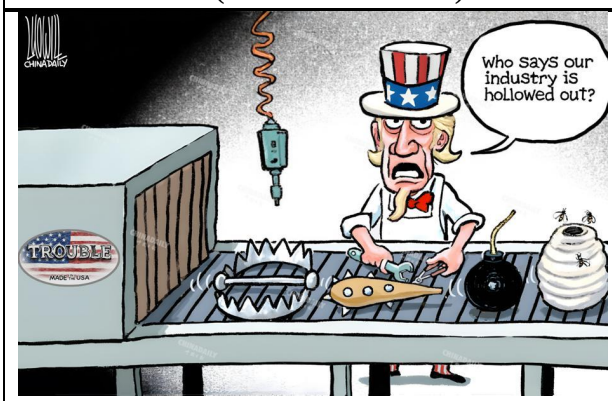
C-7 (2025-04-11 20:18)

C-8 (2025-04-15 14:05)

C-9 (2025-04-17 07:38)



C-10 (2025-04-17 20:10)



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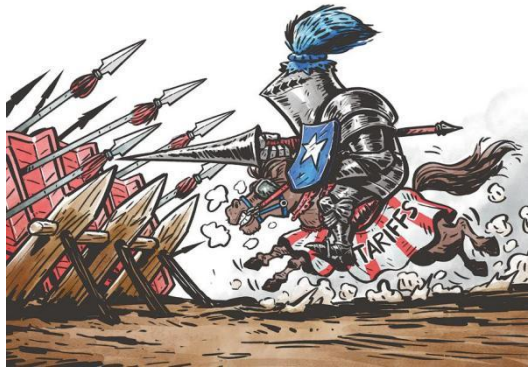

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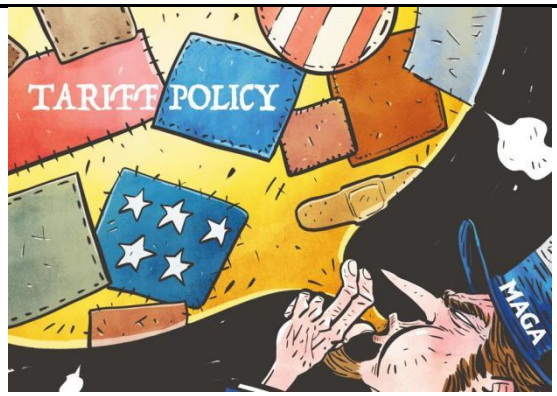

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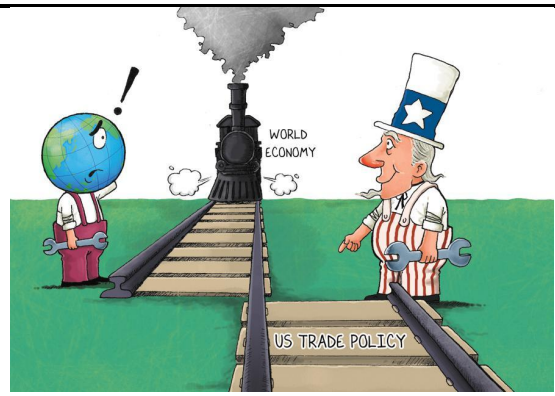
C-14 (2025-05-03 09:19)

C-15 (2025-05-05 15:24)



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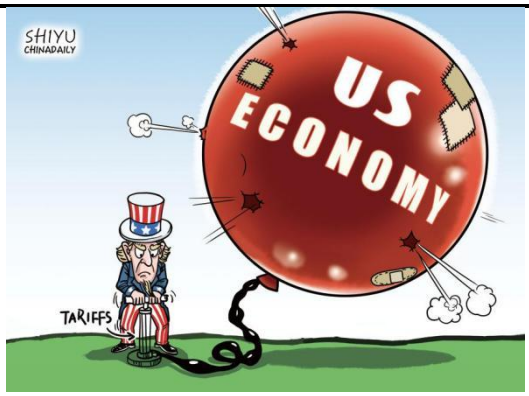

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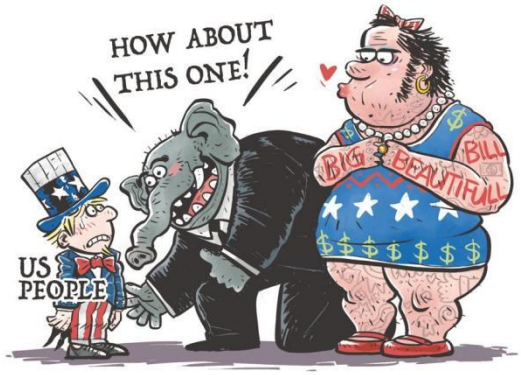
C-18 (2025-05-12 09:26)

C-19 (2025-06-06 09:29)



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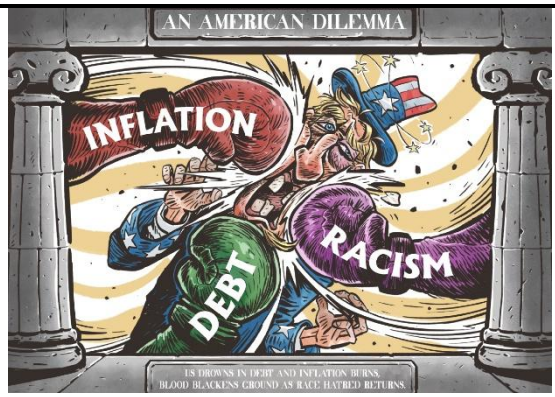

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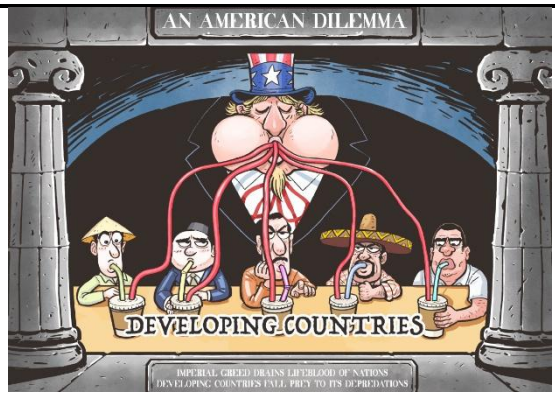
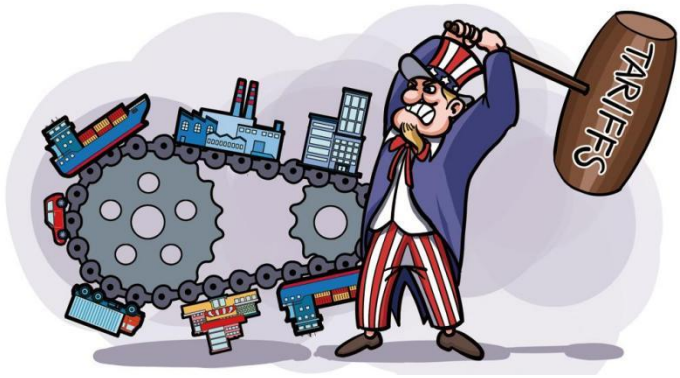
C-22 (2025-06-12 07:17)



C-23 (2025-06-16 08:50)



C-24 (2025-07-09 06:10)

C-25 (2025-07-16 09:08)

C-26 (2025-07-30 14:01)

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Global Flows and Digital Discourse: Decoding Immigration Debate through Political Economy and Cultural Studies

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Abstract

Social media is a digital battlefield, where opposing viewpoints clash over immigration policies and refugee resettlement. This article aims to theorize the intersection of critical political economy and cultural studies to examine immigration debates in the age of digital media. Critical political economy highlights how global capitalism, labor markets, and political institutions shape immigration policies, media ownership, and the commodification of migrant voices. Cultural studies, by contrast, interrogate the symbolic dimensions of media narratives, showing how identity, representation, and cultural ideologies structure public discourse on migration. By situating immigration debates within broader structures of capitalism and analyzing the cultural turn toward meaning-making, the study shows how public attitudes toward migrants are produced and contested in social media discourse. This theoretical synthesis indicated how economic interests and cultural narratives converge to shape intercultural communication, and thus the need for critical approaches to digital discourse, diversity, and representation in global migration debates.

Keywords

global capitalism, critical political economy, cultural narratives, intercultural communication, migration, social media

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms amplify voices, enabling people to share their personal stories, articulate complex viewpoints, and quickly spread information. However, the polarization of public attitudes is frequently the result of this unfettered flow of information. Echo chambers arise, strengthening preconceived notions and obstructing productive discourse. Public opinion is shaped by emotionally charged stories and visuals predominating in debates. Social media platforms operate as both accelerators of empathy and breeding grounds for polarizing narratives that influence policy decisions, greatly shaping public sentiment on immigration and refugee resettlement. In this scenario, this research focuses on public attitudes toward migrants and how social media platforms present public perspectives on this issue.

Recent work with social media data shows that online debates about migration are closely linked to wider concerns about economic security, cultural cohesion, and public order, and that digital platforms can amplify perceptions of threat as well as solidarity (Chen et al., 2022; Gu et al., 2022; Koikkalainen et al., 2021). In the Canadian context, official statistics and public opinion surveys further reveal how immigration and refugee resettlement are discussed against the backdrop of ambitious admission targets, housing shortages, and rising living costs (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023; Coletto & Sheppard, 2023). These developments highlight the need for critical approaches that can explain not only what is being said about migrants on social media, but also how such discourse is shaped by broader structures of power, economy, and culture.

The first framework under scrutiny is the critical political economy, which helps explain social phenomena as well as power and this role in the changing dynamics of global capitalism (Winseck, 2017). It helps critique power relations among capitalism, the state and the media. It will explain the use of platforms and social media in intercultural communication. The second media studies framework under scrutiny is critical cultural studies. The main focus is the analysis of the role of media in the shaping and reflecting of culture. It emphasizes how media texts and practices will contribute to the construction of meaning (Stokes, 2021).

Within media and communication research, critical political economy highlights how ownership structures, labor relations, and commodification processes shape both media systems and public communication (Fuchs & Mosco, 2015; Hardy, 2014; Smythe, 1977). Critical cultural studies, by contrast, addresses questions of ideology, representation, and meaning-making, emphasizing that media content and practices are always embedded in relations of power, identity, and everyday life (Deacon et al., 2021; Patterson, 2014). Bringing these perspectives together is important for understanding how social media function as both infrastructures of digital capitalism and sites where cultural narratives about migrants are produced, circulated, and contested.

A significant connection exists between critical political economy and understanding how it relates to culture. At the beginning of critical media studies in the mid-twentieth century, the Frankfurt School integrated critical political economy and cultural studies to critique the power relations and economy in

society (Babe, 2009). After several decades, as critical media studies became increasingly concrete, these two primary research approaches diverged into distinct orientations. Today, however, it is crucial to determine a "dialectical middle ground" between critical political economy and cultural studies while conducting critical media research (Babe, 2009, p. 5). A complex set of factors shapes how society perceives culture and how the media reflects personal beliefs and attitudes, including broader ideological frameworks, everyday meaning-making practices, platform infrastructures, and the socio-economic conditions in which communication occurs (Hall, 1997; Couldry, 2012). It is also evident that the political economy has taken a cultural turn. Researchers argue that contemporary political economy must incorporate questions of representation, identity, and everyday meaning-making to adequately explain how power operates within media systems (Hardy, 2014; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Mosco, 2009). When analyzed through the combined lenses of critical political economy and cultural studies, immigration policies can be understood as outcomes of intertwined economic and cultural power relations. Critical political economy determines how media systems, capitalist structures, and state interests shape public debates and policy environments (Babe, 2009; Fuchs & Mosco, 2015). Cultural studies, in turn, illuminates how immigration policies become embedded in broader narratives of identity, belonging, and representation circulating through media and public discourse (Deacon et al., 2021).

Responding to Babe's (2009 p. 5) call for a "dialectical middle ground", this article explicitly theorizes how critical political economy and critical cultural studies can be reconnected in the analysis of digital migration discourse. That is, the article proposes an integrated analytical framework that treats social media as sites where economic interests, policy regimes, and platform logics intersect with cultural narratives, identity constructions, and everyday meaning-making around migration. Focusing on Canada as a case where immigration and refugee resettlement plans unfold amid a housing crisis and cost-of-living pressures (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023; Coletto & Sheppard, 2023), this study examines how migrants are represented in social media discourse and how these representations draw on, and feed back into, wider economic and cultural logics. Drawing on social media monitoring data collected in late 2023, this study asks:

> RQ1: How are migrants represented in Canadian social media discourse on immigration policies and refugee resettlement, and what economic and cultural logics underpin these representations?
>
> RQ2: How can an integrated framework combining critical political economy and critical cultural studies deepen our understanding of the power relations that structure digital debates about migration?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The critical political economy approach

The critical political economy of media is a dynamic research field that focuses on the complex intersections of media, economics, and politics. Numerous researchers believe the critical political

economy of media to be basic to media studies after accomplishing multidisciplinary research (Winseck, 2017). Since the 1930s, critical political economy scholars have debated the intersections of various theories and methodologies across multiple disciplines and sociological dimensions (Dow, 2023). According to Babe (2009), critical political economy can be separated into two branches: Marxist and institutional (non-Marxist) approaches, thereby highlighting the key concepts of different scholars and revealing the media's power dynamics and economic relations.

Marxism dominates critical political economy and examines capital accumulation in the media from an economic perspective. Theodor W. Adorno appears to have contributed more to musicology, art, and aesthetics than to other disciplines. However, there is no doubt that he was the first to employ Marxism to analyze the conflict between elites and the masses in capitalism and to establish the concept of "cultural industry," which provided a foundation for further discussion in the critical political economy of media (Babe, 2009). Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco expand on the Frankfurt School's concepts, employing Marxism to investigate media under the capitalist power structure (Babe, 2009; Fuchs & Mosco, 2015; Hardy, 2014). Fuchs emphasizes the significance of communication processes in capitalist production and consumption, as well as the media's role in shaping public discourse. By employing a Marxist theoretical framework, he emphasizes the importance of focusing on the broader political and economic context. Similarly, Mosco investigates the implications of the shift to information capitalism to explore power relations and distribution systems. Jonathan Hardy (2014) underlined that Marxism should be employed to further restructure the critical political economy in the twenty-first century through a comprehensive review of media studies.

On the other hand, two prominent non-Marxist scholars addressed the relationship between media control and political and economic power in different dimensions. As an institutionalist, Harold Adams Innis is credited with exploring how communication shapes social interactions and consciousness (Babe, 2009; Hardy, 2014). He postulated two concentrations: media ownership and control concentration, and the concentration of communication in mass awareness. Innis explored the concept of "knowledge monopoly" and how control of communication channels translates into power (Babe, 2009). Dallas W. Smythe (1997, p. 5) defined "audience commodity theory" and examined how media are integrated into capitalist society and play a critical role in reproducing economic relations. He also emphasized the connection between national policies, the political elites, and the media industry's commodification (Hardy, 2014).

Although scholars in their fields apply different theoretical frameworks and sociological perspectives, they both aim to examine how media structure and content are inextricably connected to socioeconomic and political power relations. The critical political economy of media can be better understood by examining various theoretical ideas, which reveal how media systems, ownership patterns, and production processes affect and are affected by larger socioeconomic structures.

Various vital aspects of the critical political economy need to be considered. One crucial aspect to consider is production, which involves making sense of the content of the media. Different agents are

involved in the show, including the media owners, the managers, advertisers, sources and users. Another key aspect to consider in the critical political economy is content, which refers to what is produced through media manipulation and filtering of propaganda (Fuchs & Mosco, 2015). It is crucial to consider the content's complexity, its ideology, the cultural commodities it produces, and their symbolic value. The audience is another critical aspect to consider, including the population who consume the media content. It will be vital for understanding the economics and power dynamics behind media provision (Smythe, 1977). Political institutions and power relations shape media, as media will shape its content toward a given political standpoint and likely calibrate it to meet these views. In this scenario, the media and political institutions will usually interact to shape public thinking and debates about social problems, such as immigration. The critical political economy lens thus allows this study to situate social media posts about migrants within wider struggles over resource allocation, labor markets, and state responsibilities.

2.1.1. Critical Political Economy (CPE) and immigration attitudes on social media

Immigration policies, immigrants, social media, and critical political economy are all intricately and multidimensionally related. The study of critical political economy examines how social and political dynamics are shaped by economic institutions. Examining immigration in the context of global market pressures and labor demands, it examines how economic interests influence policy. Social media is critical because it provides a platform for migrant voices, allows people to share personal stories, and stimulates international debate on immigration-related issues. It provides a forum for planning and rallying support while refuting prevailing narratives that are reinforced by conventional media. Applying critical political economy with social media can expose the power structures that influence public opinion concerning migrants and immigration policies.

The critical political economy framework offers insights into the dynamics of power relations within global capitalism, the state, and the media. In the context of social media, this framework can be applied to understand how platforms wield influence in shaping public attitudes toward migration. The study by Chen et al. (2022) aligns with the critical political economy perspective by examining the role of social media in the dissemination of opinions and the potential impact on societal views regarding migration. It recognizes the significance of these platforms in influencing public discourse and, consequently, public attitudes. Social media helps distribute information and viewpoints globally while also amplifying the voices of various people. Examining the opinions spoken on these forums offers important insights into the intricate interactions between variables that influence public perceptions of migration. The critical political economy framework helps contextualize these dynamics within broader power structures and societal relations, shedding light on how social media platforms contribute to the construction of public narratives on migration (Fuchs & Mosco, 2015).

The impact of social media on intercultural communication within the framework of critical political economy is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. One key aspect of critical political economy is the recognition that media, including social media, is not a neutral platform but are deeply involved in power structures and economic systems (Babe, 2009). In the context of intercultural communication, it is

essential to analyze how social media platforms are shaped by and, in turn, shape political institutions and power relations. Their global reach of social media means that it operates within a capitalist framework, where profit motives often drive content dissemination and algorithmic decisions. Political institutions play a significant role in shaping the landscape of social media. Regulations, policies, and government control influence the extent to which diverse voices are represented on these platforms. The influence of political elites and powerful interest groups can impact the narratives that dominate social media spaces. Critical political economy analysis helps understand the ways in which these power structures can either facilitate or hinder intercultural communication. For instance, political elites may use social media to reinforce dominant cultural narratives or perpetuate stereotypes, limiting the potential for authentic cross-cultural understanding.

Economic interests with social media is a critical aspect of the analysis. Social media platforms, operating within a capitalist system, are driven by profit motives. The algorithms that govern content distribution are designed to maximize user engagement, often prioritizing sensational content over nuanced intercultural discussions. This can lead to the oversimplification and misrepresentation of cultural ideas, as noted by Chen et al. (2022). The commodification of user attention and the data-driven business models of social media platforms raise questions about whose voices are amplified and whose perspectives are marginalized.

2.1.2. CPE, media coverage and anti-immigrant attitudes

Empirical research further demonstrates how media coverage and social media shape anti-immigrant attitudes. Gu et al. (2022), following collective threat theory, show that perceptions of economic, cultural, and security threats are significantly associated with discriminatory attitudes toward immigrants. National identity and political conservatism contribute to heightened hostility, while religiosity plays an ambivalent role: religious affiliation and attendance can reduce antagonism, but exclusivist and ethnocentric forms of religiosity foster intolerance. Anti-immigration sentiments also intersect with other discriminatory ideologies, including traditional gender norms, and are negatively related to altruism. These findings suggest that social concerns and perceived collective threats may be more important than individual socioeconomic status in understanding attitudes toward immigration.

Framing migration primarily through crisis and threat can influence policymakers' perceptions and decisions, further shaping the trajectory of immigration policies. Policymakers, responding to public sentiment as portrayed in the media, may adopt restrictive measures that do not align with the complex realities of migration. Research on the "European refugee crisis" shows how politicization of migration led to diverse media representations across countries and to systematic overestimation of migrant numbers, as the public relied on mediated images and dominant storylines (Koikkalainen et al., 2020). Whether migrants are framed as burdens or as resources, and whether they are depicted as anonymous masses or as neighbors with specific stories, has a profound impact on how they are perceived.

From a critical political economy perspective, these patterns raise questions about media ownership, political interests, and transnational media flows. Hardy (2014) highlights how inequalities in media flows and control pose political challenges that can be addressed through critical political economy, while Chakravartty and Zhao (2008) argue that mobility and precarity of migration have become central to debates about globalization. As a result, these insights support this study's focus on how Canadian social media debates about immigration and refugee resettlement translate structural anxieties about housing, labor, and welfare into moral judgments about migrants.

2.2. The cultural studies frameworks

The second media studies framework under consideration in this scenario is cultural studies. It is based on analyzing the media's role in shaping and reflecting culture. It helps connect the mass media and different aspects of material culture and the society's political, social and economic institutions (Agger, 2014). Cultural studies assume that the media has a powerful impact on constructing public awareness concerning various issues. Additionally, continuous exposure to media will build the mindset as well as the behavior of the individual as well as the society. It also assumes that representation concerns how the world is socially constructed and presented to us in meaningful ways. It focuses on the connection between language, expression, relationship, and culture and how these are connected to the media. As Babe (2009) notes in his discussion of Grossberg's work, cultural studies approaches culture as a contextual and articulated practice concerned with the complex relations between culture and power.

Scholars of critical cultural studies seek to investigate the relationship between cultural practices and the distribution of communicative power. Within the field, Marxist approaches have gained prominence, offering distinct analytical stages. The first stage witnessed the emergence of culturalist Marxism, challenging both Leavisite literary criticism and empirical sociology of mass communication (Lumley et al., 1985). Additionally, another approach emphasizes the need to reaffirm economic and class determinations within an older Marxist tradition (Agger, 2014). This evolution showcases the interdisciplinary nature of media and cultural studies, grappling with competing theoretical frameworks. In the context of migration, cultural studies become a valuable tool to explore the sociocultural aspects intertwined with media narratives, identity, and representation, revealing how these elements are entangled with economic systems and immigration governance. According to Patterson (2014), there is academic contention, conceptual contestations, and a lack of consensus, particularly in defining culture. Therefore, culture is a stable process of collectively made knowledge structures and a pragmatic component that grounds the former. Critical cultural studies, as a framework, investigates how policies interact with cultural narratives, identity, and representation. The socio-cultural aspects of migration are illuminated by understanding the intertwined nature of cultural beliefs, economic systems, and immigration governance. Patterson's call for a nuanced and comprehensive examination of culture provides a valuable perspective for analyzing the complexities of migration in modern society. It underscores the need to consider diverse cultural configurations and the dynamic interplay between knowledge structures and practical knowledge.

Critical cultural studies help us understand how the media can manipulate and brainwash, empowering individual resistance and allowing people to produce their own meanings. For this study, critical cultural studies are particularly useful for analyzing how media and social media texts construct migrants as "others," neighbors, or scapegoats, and how these constructions organize emotional responses such as fear, resentment, responsibility, or solidarity (Agger, 2014; Baldwin & McCracken, 2014).

2.2.1. Cultural studies perspectives on social media narratives

Within the field of critical cultural studies, the interaction between migrants and social media demonstrates a dynamic junction of identity, representation, and connectivity. Social internet gives migrants the power to reclaim their stories, share cultural experiences, and refute stereotypes. Critical cultural studies investigate how these virtual environments influence the formation of immigrant identities and promote international cultural interchange. Social media transforms into a tool for cultural adaptation and preservation by giving a platform to a variety of viewpoints and cultural expressions. Examined through the prism of cultural studies, this mutually beneficial relationship between migrants and social media underscores the revolutionary influence of digital communication on the cultural composition of immigrant populations.

Culture encompasses the architecture of meanings, practices, and artifacts that define the life-world of identifiable groups. Applied to media studies, this framework highlights how media texts and practices contribute to the construction of meaning in broader cultural contexts (Hall, 1997). In the field of migration, cultural studies enable exploration of how media narratives, practices, and representations intersect with cultural beliefs, identity, and societal perceptions (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Esses et al., 2013). This framework is instrumental in illustrating the complex relationships between media, culture, and migration, as well as their dynamic and contested nature (De Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). Moreover, with its focus on power, cultural studies offers insights into how media, as a powerful cultural force, can either perpetuate or challenge inequalities and hierarchies associated with migration (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

Social media platforms are effective tools that can both challenge and reinforce dominant preconceptions and established narratives. Analyzing migration through the lens of cultural studies in media provides a holistic understanding of how policies, beliefs, and economic systems are interconnected, influencing and reflecting broader power relations in modern society. Social media facilitates the coexistence and interplay of these configurations, allowing individuals to maintain connections with their roots while participating in the culture of their new environment. At the same time, cultural studies reminds us that digital representations of migrants can reproduce racialized and classed stereotypes, aestheticize borders and "crises," and naturalize particular visions of belonging and exclusion.

2.2.2. Critical cultural studies framework exploration and insights

Critical cultural studies assume that media content is not neutral but is influenced by underlying cultural values, ideologies, and power dynamics (Deacon et al., 2021). Key factors of interest include the cultural assumptions embedded in media representations, the perpetuation of dominant ideologies, and the construction of social meanings surrounding issues like immigration and refugee resettlement. The contemporary social media landscape further amplifies the intersection of culture and migration. As individuals and communities engage with online platforms, social media plays a significant role in shaping cultural narratives, influencing perceptions of identity, and reflecting broader power relations. Analyzing migration through critical cultural studies allows for a holistic understanding of how social media contributes to the construction of meaning in the context of immigration.

The strengths of this framework lie in its ability to reveal the symbolic dimensions of media messages and to uncover how they contribute to the construction of social reality. It foregrounds questions of voice, visibility, and the everyday practices through which people interpret and negotiate media texts. However, its limitations include potential subjectivity in interpreting cultural meanings and a tendency, in some versions, to underplay the economic and structural factors that influence media production and platform governance (Baldwin & McCracken, 2014). By bringing critical cultural studies into dialogue with critical political economy, this article seeks to retain the strengths of both approaches: the former's attention to representation, identity, and everyday meaning-making, and the latter's focus on ownership, commodification, and structural crisis.

3. Method

According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2023), more than 46,500 refugees from over 80 countries have been resettled in Canada in 2022. However, the 2023 housing crisis and rising living costs are prompting substantial concern among Canadians and permanent residents. Following government assertions that the housing crisis will take decades to address, Abacus Data conducted a national survey in which 62% of respondents expressed anxiety about home affordability (Coletto & Sheppard, 2023).

Social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and disseminating information on this topic. Debates often revolved around issues such as immigration policies, reforms, refugee resettlement, and the impact of immigration on economies and social structures. This study employs a qualitative, theory-driven case study design that combines social media monitoring with critical, theory-driven analysis (Proudfoot, 2023; DeJonckheere et al., 2024). Rather than seeking to measure Canadian public opinion in a statistically representative way, the study aims to illustrate how the integrated framework of critical political economy and critical cultural studies can be applied to digital debates about immigration and refugee resettlement.

3.1. Data collection

The empirical focus is on public social media discussions of immigration and refugee resettlement in Canada during a period of heightened concern about housing affordability and the cost of living. To capture these debates, data were collected from November 1 to December 1, 2023. This one-month window allows the study to observe both short-term reactions to policy announcements and more sustained patterns in how migration is linked to economic issues.

Data were gathered using an automated, licensed social media analytics tool (blinded for peer review) that accesses public data via platform APIs. The tool continuously monitors selected platforms and aggregates posts that match predefined search queries. In this study it tracked content from X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, online news sites, and blogs, reflecting the range of spaces where Canadian users discuss immigration and refugee policy.

The search strategy combined terms related to immigration and refugees (for example, “immigration,” “refugee(s),” “asylum,” “Palestinian refugees,” “Canada immigration policy,” “refugee resettlement”) with contextual terms associated with housing and economic concerns (for example, “housing crisis,” “rent,” “cost of living”) and with relevant hashtags. The tool retrieved all publicly available posts and articles that matched these queries during the specified period. After initial harvesting and automatic de-duplication, the dataset contained 3,142 items. Through manual screening to remove advertisements, non-Canadian content, and posts where migration was only mentioned in passing, a final corpus of 2,005 relevant and original posts and news articles was retained for analysis.

3.2. Data analysis

The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, the dashboards and exported data were examined descriptively to map the overall volume and distribution of immigration-related content across platforms during the study period. Figure 1, for instance, visualizes the relative contribution of X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, news, and blogs to the online conversation, while also indicating peaks and troughs in activity.

Figure 1. Canada immigration and refugee debate social media monitor

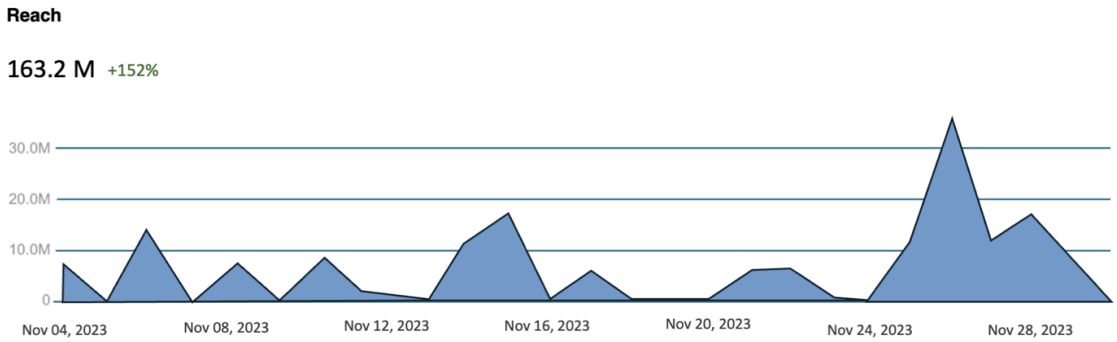

Figure 2 presents a topic cloud of the most salient and frequently co-occurring terms related to immigration and refugees in the Canadian context. These descriptive outputs provide a bird's-eye view of the digital field in which more detailed framings emerge.

Figure 2. Canada immigration and refugee topic cloud monitor

Second, an interpretive analysis of the selection of 2,005 posts and news articles was conducted to identify recurring ways in which migrants and migration policies were discussed. The material was iteratively read several times and analytically grouped into a small number of broad thematic clusters, including posts that linked immigration to housing shortages and pressures on public services; posts that framed refugees as security risks; and posts that emphasized human rights, solidarity, or migrants' everyday contributions.

Then, the thematic clusters were interpreted through the lens of critical political economy, critical cultural studies, and their integration. On the one hand, the analysis considered how housing and cost-of-living crises, labor-market precarity, and the politics of immigration targets provide the structural conditions under which particular framings gain traction (Fuchs & Mosco, 2015; Hardy, 2014; Dow, 2023). On the

other hand, it examined how language, imagery, and narrative form construct migrants as "others," neighbors, or scapegoats, and how these symbolic constructions organize affective responses such as fear, resentment, or empathy (Agger, 2014; Baldwin & McCracken, 2014; Patterson, 2014; Stokes, 2021). The purpose is to understand how economic and cultural logics work together in selected strands of Canadian social media discourse on migration, rather than providing a quantitative content analysis of the entire dataset.

3.3. Ethical consideration

All data analyzed in this study were publicly available at the time of collection. The social media analytics tool accessed information only from public profiles and pages; no attempts were made to circumvent privacy settings or to obtain private communications. In the exported dataset and in this article, no personal identifiers (such as usernames or profile links) are reproduced. These procedures are consistent with platform terms of service and with institutional research-ethics guidelines for the use of publicly accessible online data in academic research.

4. Results and discussion

During economic downturns, immigrants are frequently used as scapegoats by those who blame them for housing shortages and job losses. The media has a significant impact on how people see things, especially in hard economic times, when people are readily swayed by alarmist stories spread by far-right politicians. The perception of migrants as "others" and as potential dangers to the status quo in society is exacerbated by the absence of factual information about them. For example, a widely circulated online poll in November 2023 about Canada's refugee resettlement policy gained more than 16,000 responses, with 96.7% opposing the government's proposal (data from public social media post).

Social media's influence on public opinion is significant, and in the era of globalization, it has become a powerful tool for shaping attitudes toward migration. Depending on media types and their objectives, they can either reinforce negative stereotypes and anti-immigrant rhetoric or contribute to better integration by highlighting migrants' stories. Recognizing the impact of media on public discourse, especially on migration issues, is essential for protecting human rights and fostering intercultural understanding.

Building on the interpretive analysis of 2,005 posts and news articles outlined above, the findings highlight several recurrent strands in the online debate. That is, the analysis focuses on posts that link immigration to housing shortages and pressures on public services, posts that frame refugees as security risks, and posts that emphasize human rights, solidarity, and migrants' everyday contributions. These aspects are explored in Sections 4.1–4.3 to illustrate how economic and cultural logics intersect in Canadian digital discourse on migration.

4.1. Critical political economy lens

The Canadian social media monitoring data shows that concerns about housing affordability, labor market precarity, and public spending are frequently articulated through the figure of the migrant rather than treated as structural policy problems in their own right. Posts link the 2023 housing crisis and cost-of-living pressures to immigration targets, framing migrants as competitors for scarce resources and questioning the state's capacity to "manage" both economic crises and refugee resettlement.

Seen from a critical political economy perspective, these patterns indicate how public anxieties generated by global capitalism and domestic austerity politics are displaced onto migrants. Rather than interrogating financialization of housing, wage stagnation, or uneven regional development, far-right accounts and partisan actors use social media to redirect blame toward refugees and newcomers, turning structural failures into a problem of "too many" or "the wrong kind of" migrants.

Both critical political economy and cultural studies offer valuable insights into the immigration debate, particularly regarding the influence of social media on public attitudes. Applying the critical political economy approach, one will realize that it offers a unique viewpoint concerning the issue of immigration. It will place the problem within the scope of capitalism and better portray topics related to inequality, exploitation, and oppression stemming from immigration (Hardy, 2014). It underscores the role of political institutions in shaping media discourse on this national concern, emphasizing how elites control the dissemination of information through various channels, including social media. The theory also explains the significant role of political institutions in amplifying or diminishing the media's voice in exposing this particular national issue. It will also help explain how political elites allow or control the spread of information about this specific issue across different channels, such as traditional and social media.

In the Canadian case, this means that immigration is not discussed in isolation but is folded into broader struggles over economic governance: whom the state is imagined to serve, whose interests are prioritized in housing and labor policy, and how public resources are allocated. Social media platforms provide a key terrain where these struggles are made visible, as parties, news outlets, and advocacy groups circulate narratives that either naturalize or contest the coupling of "housing crisis" and "refugee resettlement."

4.2. Critical cultural studies lens

On the other hand, cultural studies focus on the cultural dimensions of the immigration issue, examining how media representation is influenced by and, in turn, shapes cultural contexts and changes. The topic cloud and sample posts point to a dense symbolic field in which migrants are represented through recurring storylines, such as "burdens," "good workers" or "deserving refugees." These labels do not simply describe reality, but they organize how users feel, whom they empathize with, and which policy options appear commonsense or unthinkable. Combining these perspectives enhances our understanding of the immigration debate in the context of contemporary media dynamics. The cultural studies aspect

will emphasize the cultural basis of this particular issue. For example, it will focus on this issue's social and political context and history. Cultural studies will also examine how culture has shaped how the media portrays this issue locally, nationally or internationally. It will also emphasize the patterns of cultural change influenced by how the media portrays this specific issue and its role in cultural construction. The cultural framework offers deeper insight into the problem by focusing on its cultural basis. The issue's context is then connected to the current media representation (Agger, 2014).

Social media has become a pervasive cultural configuration in contemporary society, influencing how individuals perceive and engage with the world. It serves as a platform where people share their experiences, opinions, and cultural expressions. The constant accessibility of social media as a cultural phenomenon has transformed how migration is perceived and experienced. In the context of migration, social media acts as a dynamic cultural focus. It not only chronicles the experiences of migrants but also serves as a focal point for building connections and fostering a sense of community among those with shared migration experiences. Through the lens of critical cultural studies, social media becomes a tool for the activation, accessibility, and application of cultural knowledge related to migration. Moreover, the concept of configurable availability becomes evident as individuals engage with multiple cultural configurations simultaneously. Migrants, for example, may navigate between the cultural configurations of their home country, the host country, and the global online community. Social media facilitates the coexistence and interplay of these configurations, allowing individuals to maintain connections with their roots while actively participating in the culture of their new environment. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the potential challenges, such as misinformation and the spread of stereotypes that can arise within these digital cultural configurations.

From a cultural studies perspective, the Canadian debate is not only about numbers and targets but also about whose stories count. Viral posts that foreground migrants as neighbors, co-workers, or community members push against dehumanizing tropes and open up space for alternative identifications; those that depict migrants as faceless crowds at borders or shelters do the opposite, reinforcing distance and fear.

4.3. Integrating critical political economy and critical cultural studies

Efforts to counteract negative narratives include media initiatives that aim to provide a more balanced portrayal of migrants. Examples include the Migrant Voice, a UK newspaper led by migrants, which shares migrants' opinions and life stories, fostering a more inclusive public debate. Additionally, online platforms like Migrant Solidarity in Calais document refugee abuses, providing legal advice and countering misinformation. Photography projects, such as the World Press Photo Award-winning image depicting migrants seeking phone signals, play a crucial role in raising awareness and challenging stereotypes. The internet and social media, despite some challenges like cyber-racism, can serve as platforms for constructive dialogue. The international community has recognized the link between public opinion and media and is taking steps to combat xenophobia and intolerance through awareness-raising initiatives.

Applying the political economy framework to this issue involves examining how economic structures and power relations shape media coverage, discourse, and public opinion on immigration and refugee resettlement. This approach emphasizes the structural and economic influences that shape media narratives. This perspective highlights the economic structures, power dynamics, and institutional interests that underpin media representations of immigration policies. It highlights how media content is not solely a reflection of cultural values but is deeply intertwined with economic considerations. On social media, the debate may be influenced by media ownership, economic interests, and the broader political and economic context. For instance, media consolidation, advertising revenue, and representation of different perspectives in the media landscape can be analyzed through a political economy lens. The economic interests of political leaders, media owners, and advertising may shape public opinion to support their agendas when it comes to immigration legislation and refugee resettlement.

Critical cultural studies, as applied to this media issue, directs attention to the role of culture, ideology, and power in shaping media discourse. This approach involves scrutinizing the cultural assumptions, values, and ideologies embedded in the portrayal of immigration and refugee resettlement. However, the perspective of cultural studies, which emphasizes discourse and representation, offers insights into how media narratives shape meanings and identities. Analyzing the media issue through this lens involves examining the representation of immigrants and refugees in media discourse, the framing of immigration policies, and the impact on public perceptions. It considers how different groups are portrayed and whether media representations contribute to the construction of stereotypes or foster inclusive narratives. By exploring how media representations contribute to the construction of social meanings, critical cultural studies enable an examination of whether narratives reinforce specific cultural norms, stereotypes, or dominant ideologies related to immigrants and refugees. This perspective offers insights into the symbolic dimensions of the issue, revealing how cultural factors influence public perceptions and attitudes. This perspective also looks at how social media platforms serve as spaces for public discourse, enabling diverse voices and perspectives to be heard.

When evaluating which framework provides the most significant insights, it is evident that combining the critical political economy and cultural studies perspectives offers a comprehensive understanding of the media issue. The political economy framework reveals the economic structures and power dynamics that shape media content, while cultural studies illuminate the symbolic meaning-making and representation. This combined approach helps unravel the complexities of media discourse on immigration and refugee resettlement by addressing both the economic and cultural dimensions of the issue. These frameworks offer distinct yet complementary perspectives that shed light on the cultural and economic dimensions of media narratives surrounding immigration. The benefits of combining these perspectives extend to a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural and economic implications of media representations. Critical cultural studies and political economy explore how cultural ideologies and economic considerations intersect in shaping media narratives about immigration policies. This approach recognizes that media content is shaped not only by economic forces but also by cultural factors that contribute to the construction of meaning and identity. However, the limits lie in the complexity of navigating two distinct frameworks, requiring a nuanced analysis that balances economic and cultural dynamics. Striking

a balance between both viewpoints is therefore critical, so that the interaction of cultural and economic factors is acknowledged without favoring one over the other. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the media issue at hand, this requires a methodological approach that deftly navigates the complexities of cultural and economic analysis.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined Canadian social media debates on immigration and refugee resettlement through an integrated framework that combines critical political economy and critical cultural studies. By situating public attitudes within the context of housing and cost-of-living crises, and by analyzing how migrants are symbolically represented in online discourse, the study has responded to Babe's (2009) call for a "dialectical middle ground" between economic and cultural analyses of media. In doing so, it has shown that digital platforms are sites where economic interests, policy regimes, and platform logics intersect with cultural narratives, identity constructions, and everyday meaning-making around migration.

The critical political economy and the cultural studies frameworks have different viewpoints and assumptions. Critical political economy theory focuses on understanding the relationship between the media and the broader social structure. It also helps explain the power relations impacting media, such as capitalism and the state. The critical political framework can rely on various effective methods, including the explanation of social phenomena and power relations. It usually depends on critiquing current issues and exploring trends as they occur and their origins (Balnaves et al., 2017). Critical cultural studies is based on the social and political context in which the media operates, and it helps create an understanding of the social environment, as well as the institutions and individuals who are affected by, and affect, the media. It makes a sense of how the media affects the different patterns of change in society, especially concerning various issues. The cultural studies framework relies on various methods, including cultural analysis guided by different theories. It also focuses on research on values, behaviors, and other cultural characteristics. Both frameworks are very useful, and the critical political economy approach will help us understand the media's structural and functional connections with other stakeholders (Deacon et al., 2021). The cultural process is beneficial since it connects society and political systems and is compatible with current research. The cultural method is more effective for analyzing past, current, and future issues because it helps create a cultural context and connect it to society across different time frames.

Disclosure statement

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